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BLUE RIBBON

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**BADMEN
BEHIND
A
BADGE**

By
T. W. Ford

15¢

**COMPLETE
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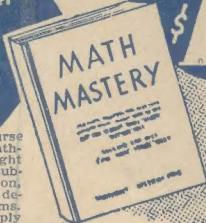
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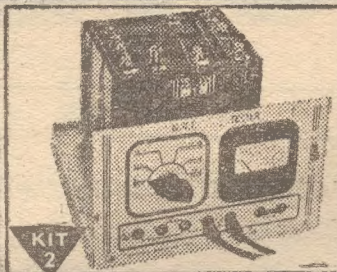
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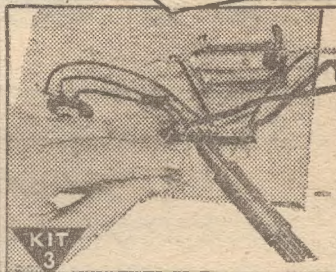
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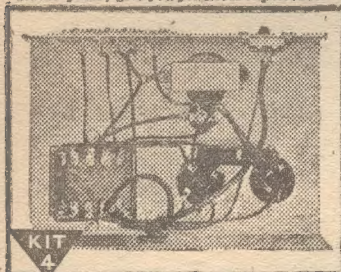
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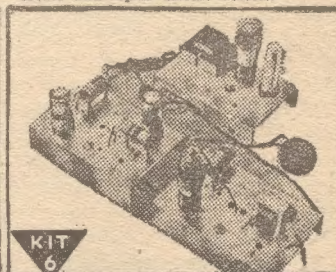
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Volume 9

December, 1946

Number 3

ACTION-PACKED NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BADMAN BEHIND A BADGE By T. W. Ford 10

A hunted, friendless lobo, Sam Kilden found himself forced to take the role of the famous Boots Kilden to clean up a lawless town. But he'd learned from experience that a man can't escape from his past—that it would only be a question of time before exposure came, and he'd be an outcast again. Still, something kept him playing this game straight for all his determination to do the smart thing . . .

COMPLETE NOVELET

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS By Cliff Campbell 83

You can take your pick, Donnel: Shall I gut-shoot you now, or do you change clothes with me and try to break away before the law closes in on us?

SHORT STORIES

HORSETHIEF HERO By Judy Zissman 78

A fact story of the old west.

THE GREENER By Frankie-Lee Weed and Kelly Masters 79

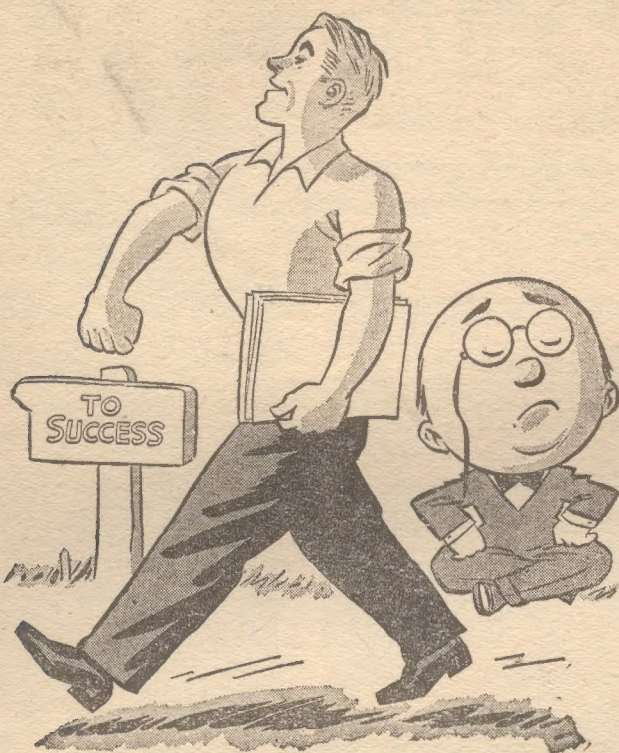
This geologist hombre was a critter just beyond comprehension—but he had one thing about him that any Western man could understand — courage!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor



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ADVICE FOR BAD SKIN

Stop Worrying Now About Pimples, Blackheads
And Other Externally Caused Skin Troubles
JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS

By *Betty Memphis*

Have you ever stopped to realize that the leading screen stars whom you admire, as well as the beautiful models who have lovely, soft white skin, were all born just like you with a lovely smooth skin?

The truth is that many girls and women do not give their skin a chance to show off the natural beauty that lies hidden underneath those externally caused pimples, blackheads and irritations. For almost anyone can have the natural, normal complexion which is in itself beauty. All you have to do is follow a few amazingly simple rules.

Many women shut themselves out of the thrills of life—dates, romance, popularity, social and business success—only because sheer neglect has robbed them of the good looks, poise and feminine self-assurance which could so easily be theirs. Yes, everybody looks at your face. The beautiful complexion, which is yours for the asking, is like a permanent card of admission to all the good things of life that every woman craves. And it really can be yours—take my word for it!—no matter how discouraged you may be this very minute about those externally caused skin miseries.

Medical science gives us the truth about a lovely skin. There are small specks of dust and dirt in the air all the time. When these get into the open pores in your skin, they can in time cause the pores to become larger and more susceptible to dirt particles, dust and infection. These open pores begin to form blackheads which become in-

fectured and bring you the humiliation of pimples, blackheads or other blemishes. When you neglect your skin by not giving it the necessary care, you leave yourself wide open to externally caused skin miseries. Yet proper attention with the double Viderm treatment may mean the difference between enjoying the confidence a fine skin gives you or the embarrassment of an ugly, unbeautiful skin that makes you want to hide your face.



A screen star's face is her fortune. That's why she makes it her business to protect her complexion against pimples, blackheads and blemishes. Your face is no different. Give it the double treatment it needs and watch those skin blemishes go away.

The double Viderm treatment is a formula prescribed by a skin doctor with amazing success, and costs you only a few cents daily. This treatment consists of two jars. One contains Viderm Skin Cleanser, a jelly-like formula which penetrates and acts as an antiseptic upon your pores. After you use this special Viderm Skin Cleanser, you simply apply the Viderm Fortified Medicated Skin Cream. You rub this in, leaving an almost invisible protective covering for the surface of your skin.

This double treatment has worked wonders for so many cases of external skin troubles that it may help you, too—in fact, your money will be refunded



if it doesn't. Use it for only ten days. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. It is a guaranteed treatment. Enjoy it. Your dream of a clear, smooth complexion may come true in ten days or less.

Use your double Viderm treatment every day until your skin is smoother and clearer. Then use it only once a week to remove stale make-up and dirt specks that infect your pores, as well as to aid in healing external irritations. Remember that when you help prevent blackheads, you also help to prevent externally caused skin miseries and pimples.

Incidentally, while you two jars and the doctor's directions are on their way to you, be sure to wash your face as often as necessary. First use warm water, then cleanse with water as cold as you can stand it, in order to freshen, stimulate and help close your pores. After you receive everything, read your directions carefully. Then go right to it and let these two fine formulas help your dreams of a beautiful skin come true.

Just mail your name and address to Betty Memphis, care of the New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 42, New York 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive the doctor's directions, and both jars, packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. If you are in any way dissatisfied, your money will be cheerfully refunded. To give you an idea of how fully tested and proven the Viderm double treatment is, it may interest you to know that, up to this month, over two hundred and twelve thousand women have ordered it on my recommendation. If you could only see the thousands of happy, grateful letters that have come to me as a result, you would know the joy this simple treatment can bring. And, think of it!—the treatment must work for you, or it doesn't cost you a cent.



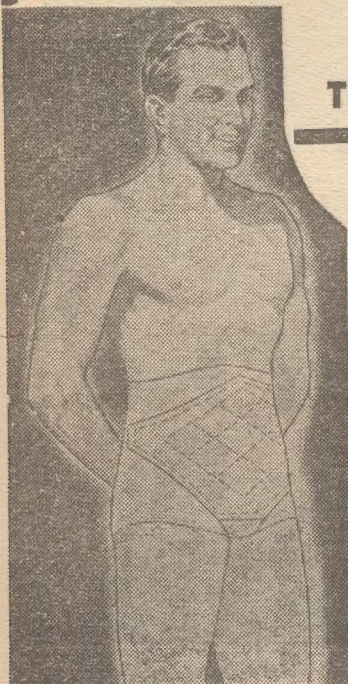
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it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."

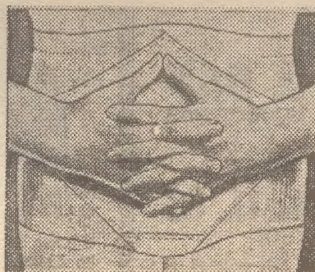
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."

F. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

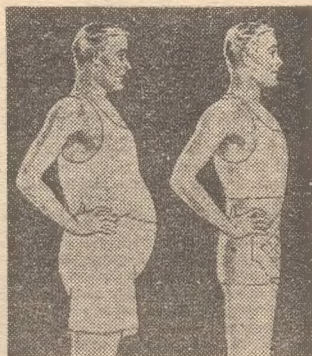
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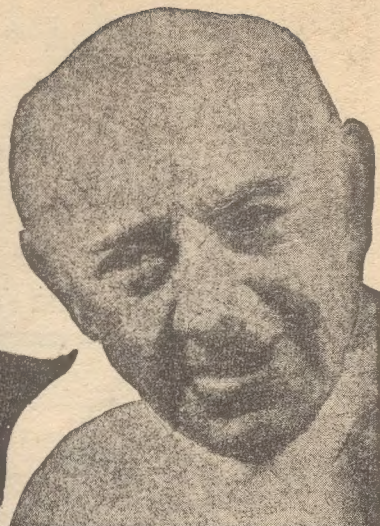
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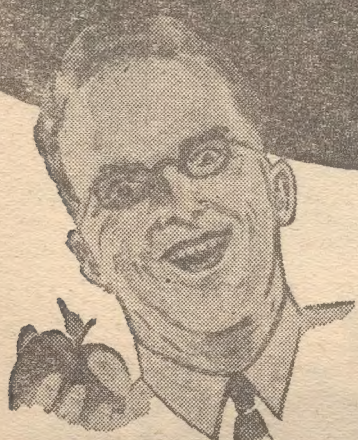
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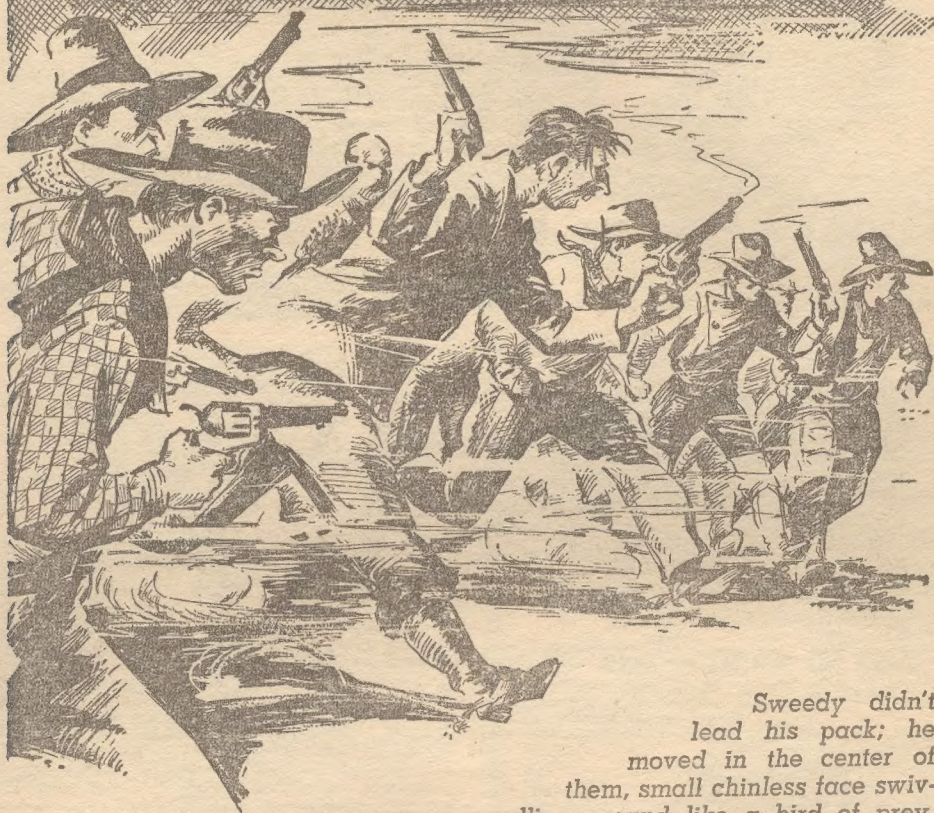
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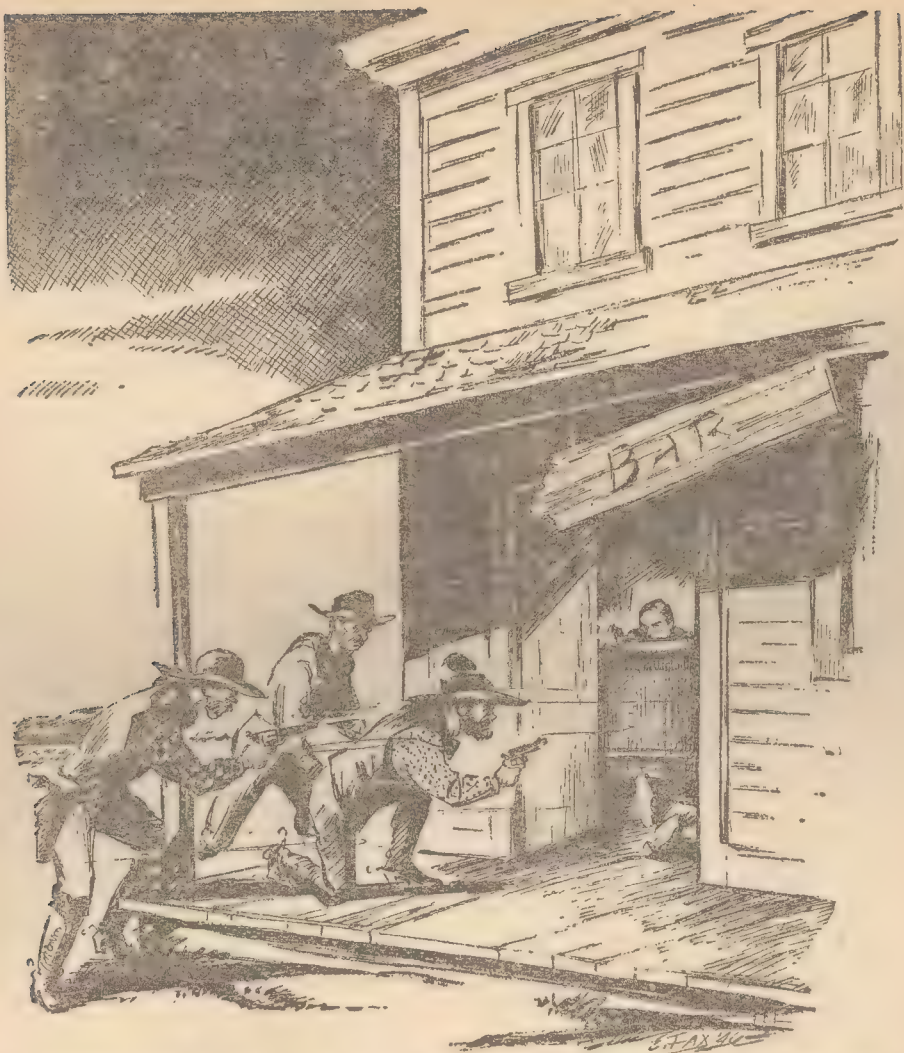
Badmen Behind A Badge

By T. W. FORD



Sweedy didn't
lead his pack; he
moved in the center of
them, small chinless face swiv-
elling around like a bird of prey.

Son of the famous Boots Kilden, he found himself everywhere mistaken for his father and now he was in a position where he had to be the original Boots or wear a hempen necktie. He'd play the game, he thought, take on the lawman's position thrust upon him until the opportunity came for a break, a chance to light out with a saddlebag packed with cash. But, somehow, the destiny which hung over him kept on forcing him to play it straight . . .



ACTION - PACKED, BOOK - LENGTH NOVEL

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

RED-TRESSED Jennifer Redall rode into Saddle City in the stage, serene with that calm smile, a job awaiting her. Sam Kilden skulked in, a fugitive, wary as a coyote, bleak-eyed face masked by the guarded look of a man who knows no one as friend. Jen Redall let her long gray eyes slide over the throng at the stage station, picked up her carpetbag, and headed for The Lucky Lode where she was to entertain. At once, three-four gents fought to tote the bag of the demure-seeming girl. When Kilden came, he dragged

his weary wounded carcass through the shadows of a side road, wondering how he could steal a few dollars. At sight of the figure that prowled like a human wolf, an hombre rounding a corner slapped his hand over a holster.

Jen Redall, before she departed from Saddle City, would sow the seed of evil, breed treachery, and poison the souls of many men. And Sam Kilden would be backed against the wall, fighting like a wildcat to hold the last shred of Law in a hell-torn range town...

CHAPTER I

KILDEN used the night as a mask to cover his entrance into Saddle City. He came walking, none too steadily, down a side street toward the main drag. That hammerhead cayuse he had bought with his last few dollars had been left at the edge of the big bustling town. He was afraid it was a stolen pony; the gent who'd had it had been shifty-eyed, willing to part with it at too cheap a price. Kilden walked none too straight because he was hungry and bogged down by nights and days of desperate hard riding, and because the crudely bandaged slug wound over his ribs ached painfully. His lean hands kept hooking nervously over the gun butts. It was the way an animal, fearing attack, would keep baring its teeth.

He was raw-boned, with a fleshless body that looked as if it had been whipped flat by life. Black hair, that had a trick of lying flat in the one-sided part despite Hell or highwater, capped the hollow-cheeked face sliced by a high-bridged nose. His tight skin was the color of old saddle leather though underlain by the paleness of desperate fatigue now. The eyes were the hue of bleakness, a stone-gray probing above a strangely boyish unsullied mouth. Despite his wounded condition and his spent vitality, Sam Kilden moved with a slithery grace, the grace of a man accustomed to coming and going without attracting attention. And behind the guarded look, an observant hombre might just suspect the hurricane of emotion bedded in the depths of him, might sense that here was a man capable of being a master—or a rabid savage killer.

SAM KILDEN thought of himself only as a saddle bum, a two-bit lobo; he knew himself as a man who had always run outside the pack, often from it.

So he came walking down the slight hill of the side street, prepared to steal and ready to run again. His runover heels rattled on the stony path and he resented the sound. Near the corner of the main road he sped up almost unconsciously, crazed for

some grub and the sting of whisky to break the pain in his body. He jerked the brim of his battered, flat-crowned hat lower over his beard-stubbed face. The glare of a coal-oil torch at the doorway of a place licked down his cheek and he swerved away from it as if he'd felt the flame itself.

There was something wrong; he smelled it in the air like he always could. Something was building. Glum-faced men stood in little knots up and down the line, grimness stamped in their watchful posture. There were no women in sight. A quick glance in a couple of nearby windows showed no business. In one of them, a honky tonk, the hussies sat around dead-faced at the tables, few of them escorted, the musicless place like a tomb. Kilden faded in to a big-boled cottonwood to become part of its trunk. *They might be waiting for him, the horsethief!*

A man called through the darkness from down by the bank with the white pillars at the other end of the street. Heads turned that way and Kilden was a wraith gliding over the sidewalk to vanish back into the side road gloom. But he wasn't leaving town. He had to get food, a safe hole in which to sleep; he couldn't go any further. A little way up, a tree-shrouded lane led to the left. So did Kilden. He moved behind stores and buildings of the main road, wondered perhaps about breaking into a dark one. Then he spotted the handful of men standing at the end of a wide alley; they toted rifles. He kept going.

Words from them drifted after him—"and if we can just keep him from gitting in an' hiding in some hole. . . A killer like that—"

So he was a killer now—he must have done more than just wing that pelican in the getaway on that stolen pony way back at Big Gin Creek. The wraith that was a man flitted through the liquidlike shadow faster. They'd never take him alive; that he had sworn a long time back. But he wanted some grub and sleep first, then he could run again, fight if he had to. He thought he caught boots in his wake and cut off the lane, up to the right, uphill. Around a shed and through a patch of skinny trees, and

he was moving again parallel to the lane. Between a couple of hovels, along a wriggling path. His breath came harder and the wound in his side hurt worse. He fell over a rock

IT WAS very hushed now save for the faint plunking of a banjo somewhere ahead. The path broadened, had been beaten smoother by many boots as it followed alongside a boarded-up place. His foot caught in a rusty piece of wire and he half stumbled out into Saddle City's infamous Whisky Row. There were no coal-oil torches there, but dull blocks of ochre light came from some windows along the narrow street of whisky mills and tough tawdry honky tonks angling off from the main drag. Kilden's head pounded and he put his hand to it near where that knife scar slanted down from his left temple. His other hand was already sliding for a holster just in case.

A voice slid from his left. "I wouldn't if I was you. . ."

It was the way a buzzard spoke when he had the drop on you, Kilden knew. His eyes skidded in his head and he saw the lank figure flattened against the building front on his left. The man was facing him as if expecting him right there, a long venomous black finger that was a Colts barrel facing the same way. He said in the unhurried gentle voice:

"Elby across the way has a proddy trigger finger too."

At the other side of the narrow road a plump figure with drawn weapon stepped from beside the porch of an unlit hovel. He sang in a low flat voice, "'Oh, the blue haze of Texas. . .'" And a third gent seemed to grow around the corner of a sharp boulder squatting at one side of the street of sin known as Whisky Row. He said:

"Ain't he real purty now? Like a fish in a barrel!"

What a hell of a place to die! That was all Kilden could think then, because he *would* die, he knew. He was going to make a play, and they had him from three sides. But what a hell of a hole to cough out one's last gasp of life in. . . the squalid frame places crouched like a double line of drunk-

en derelicts. . . the foul watery snake, choked with offal, crawling down the side of the road. A maudlin snatch of rattling laughter from a woman somewhere before it was choked off. A limping dog ducking into an alley before, a piece of carrion in its jaws.

"Steady, mister. Steady," said the lank one as he walked out from the left. "You ain't no fool. You wanta live."

Hope came as suddenlike as a gopher popping its head from a hole. The lank man wore no hat, and above the shallow forehead, a white lock ran back in the middle of his dark hair. Kilden knew him by that. Couldn't remember his name, but he remembered seeing him some time back in a pueblo over in The Territory. A U. S. deputy marshal had called upon White Lock to surrender on a killing charge. White Lock had pulled a hideout weapon, shot the marshal, and escaped. This man would be no John Law or possman. He was a lobo himself. Kilden's own kind.

KILDEN made a helpless gesture with his hands and croaked. "They're after me. Close—danged close. A gent told me if I got in here an' saw the right hombre. . . " He let it hang there prayerfully

White Lock nodded knowingly as he put his gun muzzle against Sam Kilden's side, not roughly, hardly denting the ragged red shirt "Posse trouble, eh. Well now, mebbeso you have come to the right place; an' you'll see the right hombre, too. . . But just put your dewclaws atop your hat. That's right. We gotta be keerful Elby."

The fat man shambled over. White Lock told him to go up and see the boss, to tell Keys that a gent wearing a red shirt had just drifted in with posse trouble. The fat man went up the line at a trot. Beyond the jutting boulder, he turned in at one of the honky tonks.

There weren't even dancehall girls in sight at that place. A low light burned over the bar, and over on a small table halfway back was another lamp. Behind it sat a fleshy gent with greasy black hair in a gray frock coat,

counting some bills. There was foreign blood in his background somewhere. His hand jumped to a hogleg hidden under a hat when Elby's boots creaked the steps.

"He's come, Sleeper. Red shirt an' all. Pertending like he's a fugitive from the Law," Elby announced.

The heavy lids flickered up from Sleeper Keys' fat-hedged eyes briefly. "So that's the act, eh . . . All right." The eyes lidded so that he looked like a white-faced smug cat. He didn't bother to rise. He called and two men came out of the shadows in the rear. They needed no instructions. One stepped out a side door and his head reappeared at an open window as he removed his sombrero. The other, with a slight limp, moved over to crouch behind the empty bar, easing weapons up from well-oiled holsters as he did. They had planned this to the last detail. It would look as if the boss of Whisky Row, Sleeper Keyes himself, had shot down this Birdsall they were importing to blast him.

"All right, Elby," Keys said, already continuing the count of the stack of greenbacks. And Elby left to return down the Row.

In a minute, all three were back with Sam Kilden. They came in, Kilden's red-rimmed eyes licking over the place. White Lock said this was the man. Sleeper Keys paused in the act of licking a fat thumb.

"Oh, yes. They tell me you got a little trouble with the Law, mister. Tch, tch. . . Reckon we oughta turn you over, but I'm right careless that way. Sometimes I can use a man, a tough man. You look—" He rose, dropping the wad of bills on the table, gestured to Elby and the other two. "You fellas can go back, I can read a man's sign pronto. This fella's all right."

A LITTLE taller than Kilden, twice his size, the heavy-fleshed boss of the Row stood sizing up his rig a moment Runover cracked boots, sweat-caked trail-stained jeans; a red shirt that looked as if it had been lived in for a month. The beard stubble. Yeah, the man looked convincing.

Keys chuckled inside; he himself might have been fooled if he hadn't picked up that information Sweedy and his crowd were hiring Birdsall the gunman to come in and get him. Bribing him a cool five thousand for the job, this Birdsall with his peculiar superstition about red shirts.

"Pour yourself a drink," said Keys, thumbing at the bottle on the table. There was an unsteady note in his voice for a moment. Maybe he had taken too big a gamble. Birdsall was unholy hell, streakfast and fantastically lucky with a smokepole. On the other hand, if it looked as if he himself, Keys had beaten a man like Birdsall—well, he'd be the top man, the most feared thing in Saddle City.

He walked toward the front of the room as Kilden rattled the bottle against the glass with his shaky hands. The man at the window would yell warning if the killer tried for him then, with his back turned. Keys drew out a stogie and placed it between his teeth. Both the man at the window and the one peeping over the edge of the bar could see him. When he spat out the cigar, it would be the signal for the play, would mean he was going to draw and whirl. And the two dry-gulchers would cut loose. Birdsall would be watching him, of course. Keys heard him half choke on the whisky.

Kilden was looking at the stack of green and goldbacks with glazed eyes. He wondered if it were a mirage. Just a few of those—not all of them—and he could get out of here. Some grub, a few drinks, some shuteye. Then he could buy a free horse and hit out again. He didn't trust this pack; the boss had accepted him too easily. Something was wrong. Just a few of those bills. His tongue made the circle of his lips. His grimed clawed hand went down. Fingers brushed the stack of currency, trembling.

And Sleeper Keys started the line planned to get this Birdsall off guard momentarily. "I've just been doing some fast thinking. Yeah. . . Now was you to take that there dinero—" He was going on to say, "—and do a little favor for me." He never said it.

AT THE mention of "dinero," Kilden, his own back to Keys, thought Keys saw him touching the money. It put the fugitive between the devil and the deep; he was nailed as a thief. His only hope now was to grab it and smoke his way out. His right hand taloned on it, and he came around like a cat, snatching up his left gun. He was a gaunt wolf of a thing, knowing only he fanged his way from the corner or went down.

As he swept about, a corner of the face and the raised gun muzzle of the man outside the window came into his line of vision. Kilden's Colts raged in a single thunderclap. The man outside swung back, penduluming into the darkness. Blood from the hole in his head, a fatal hole, was splashed on the window sill.

The stogie had spat from Keys' mouth a split instant before and he was wheeling, too, hand plucking a hideout weapon from under the gray frock coat. He saw Kilden plunging toward him. Kilden figured to jump a gun into him, using him as a hostage to get out of Whisky Row past those gunmen outside. That was the only thing that saved Kilden, for the man stashed behind the bar was up and triggering away.

But the victim was supposed to be back at the table. Keys' second man missed two shots, then Kilden was too close atop of the boss to fire again. Stunned, Keys stood paralyzed a moment. He still might have lived; all Kilden wanted was to get out. But Sleeper Keys dropped the derringer from the cuff of his left sleeve and shot Kilden.

The little bullet took the latter in the left forearm, knocking the big Colts from his hand. Kilden flung the greenbacks in his right hand in Keys' face. The cloud of them blocked his sight. A bullet from the boss' big gun droned by Kilden's ear. Then Kilden shot him twice through the chest with his own righthand hogleg he had ripped out. Blood like red rosettes formed on Sleeper Keys' frock coat as he half spun drowsily and settled among the greenbacks carpeting the floor.

Already, Kilden was running to-

ward the bar. If he tried to get out that front door, the one behind there would put his light out easily. That one, losing his nerve as he saw the boss drilled, dropped. Grabbing up a chair with his left arm, that had merely been numbed momentarily by the derringer flesh wound, Kilden slung it. It crashed into the bottles and the back mirror over the spot where the second gunman was. He reeled up, gashed, befuddled by the avalanche of chair and shattered glass that had showered over him, then he went down, knocked down by the slug that smashed into his shoulder.

Realizing he had been in a carefully baited and set guntrap, the red-shirted fugitive, stumbled around for the door. Muzzle flashes knifed at him from the steps. He moved backward. It was too late. Those men outside, and Lord knew how many others, had him ringed.

He ran back to the bar, rolled over the top of it, and dropped down a few yards behind the helpless moaning gunman. This would be his last stand, Sam Kilden knew. . . .

CHAPTER II

SLAPPING his sombrero back on his shoulders, the fugitive cocked an eye over the top of the counter. A bullet drilled into the bottles behind him. There were more gun reports, but no men tried to rush that doorway. Gradually Kilden's dazed senses realized the bullet cracks now were coming from the bottom of Whisky Row down near the main road. He wondered if he were going locoed.

Through a front window he sighted the fat one, Elby, of the trio that had first jumped him. The fat one was running for the back end of the Row as if his hide depended on it. It did. For Sweedy, head of the rival bunch in Saddle City, was roaring up the Row with his gun-slicks. The first gunfire to them had been the signal that their hired gunhawk, Birdsall, had slipped in and made his play. Birdsall had sent them word he would do it that way.

Behind snapping lead, they swept

in. The tall bundle of bones that was Barton Sweedy did not lead his pack. He moved in the center of them, small chinless face of his knob of head swivelling around searchingly like some bird of prey. And when he saw Keys' men legging it for the back end of Whisky Row, he knew for certain Sleeper Keys had gone to his long sleep.

"Go get them, boys. Clean out the rats! Yah! Ha-ha-ha!" He laughed. But it was an incongruous business for only one half of his face partook of the grimace of mirth. The other half was paralyzed. He had a habit of talking from the corner of the good side of his mouth.

"Keys is in there—dead! Dead on the floor, by grab!" one of the men shouted as he sighted the body through a window.

"Where's Birdsall? Hey, Birdsall!" Sweedy jumped up on the steps of the place that had been Sleeper Keys' headquarters. "Birdsall!"

Coming across the top of the bar, a bullet slanted out the doorway and just nicked the sleeve of his rusty black coat. He jumped off the steps so fast he landed on his dirty gray pants, cracking the pint bottle in his hip pocket. His hat bounced off and long greasy hair flopped around his ears. Though having plenty of dinero, he dressed like some barroom bum.

"Hey, that weren't Birdsall! It weren't!" bawled one of Sweedy's men who knew Birdsall personally. He had glimpsed Kilden when he came up to trigger. "He had on a red shirt but—"

Sweedy himself had backed into the shadows, rubbing his hip. "Probably one of Sleeper's rats somehow got cornered by Birdsall. Swing around the place and go in after—"

From inside, came the half-crazed Kilden's defiant yell. "Sure, come on an' get me! You will. . . .Awright, but plenty'll die tryin'. . . .Sure I killed this boss in here. He tried to take me too. You wanta go where he's gone—come on in, by damn!"

THAT stopped everything; it didn't make sense. Sweedy's

chief house guard stared back across the Row at him, bewildered. All firing had ceased.

"Who's with you?" yelled back Sweedy in his thin nasal voice. It must have taken a handful of them at least to have walked in and smoked down Keys in his own stronghold.

"Two dead men and a wounded coyote! And they's room for a heap more, pelican!"

Sweedy reached for his ever-present bottle, then remembered it was busted. He hurled some epithets at the hombre inside because he was unable to savvy the situation. More men were venturing into the Row as the gunsmoke thinned, a thick stream of the curious, murmuring, big-eyed. As if by magic, an alley opened in the close-packed ranks. A tiny man, dwarfed by his stove-pipe hat, barely more than five feet in height, came through. After him walked two straight-backed cold-faced men in black shirts and pants, single guns lashed down on their thighs. They looked like the cold efficient breed who would not need more than a single gun.

"Don't you think there has been enough gunning for one night, Sweedy," the diminutive figure said quietly. It was less a question than a hinted command.

Sweedy drew himself up and looked way down at the little gent. Yet somehow, by some peculiar magic, Barton Sweedy was not the bigger of the two. He said there was a gent in there.

"He ain't—well, he ain't the man we thought he was. And he ain't a Keys man. Keys is dead in there, Curp. So we—"

"Yes, yes," said Samson Curp impatiently. "So you're not sure whether or not you should kill him. The only brains you've got are located in your trigger fingers. . . . Hmmm. . . ." Setting the stove-pipe hat at a jaunty angle, folding his arms on his chest, he marched to the steps.

PEERING over the bar top, Kilden saw this man with no drawn weapons approach. "Stay the hell

out—or come in triggering, you fool!”

Samson Curp slowly mounted the steps. He heard his black-garbed gunhands behind him and ordered them back. “I haven’t got a gun, Mister,” Curp called inside.

“Stay out!” Kilden husked. “It’s a trick. I—”

“It’s no trick. I am Samson Curp the gambler. I’ve never broken my word yet, and I’m coming in.” He moved through the doorway.

“I’ll kill you!”

“I’ll give five to one you won’t.” He started across the floor of the joint. “Hmmm. . .I’ve been waiting to see Sleeper Keys like that for a long time. A man like him’ll be a credit to Boothill.”

Kilden’s sweaty wild-looking face pushed further up from the back edge of the bar. His eyelids sagged, then propped wider with an effort as he stared at this incredible little man so fastidiously garbed in pearl gray that half blended with the hue of his skin. He was a plain-looking man, this Curp, with a long nose that beaked almost down to his upper lip. He didn’t look threatening; mildness and sadness were stamped on the face. The eyes were dull impersonal windows through which his mind regarded the world.

Kilden pushed his cocked gun with the smoke wisp over the sight further across the bar. “I don’t miss,” he croaked wearily.

“An excellent habit,” Curp commented.

Kilden’s gun muzzle tipped down on the wood as if weighted by discouragement. For he read something in this almost dwarflike figure’s ugly face. You couldn’t scare him. Ever. With anything. Samson Curp was a gent who’d disciplined himself to be beyond any emotion whatsoever. “Well?”

“They say you assisted Sleeper Keys to his long-overdue grave. Is that true?” He nodded at the late boss of Whisky Row.

Kilden followed the nod with his glance. “Him? Yeah. . . Look. I know they’ve come for me. Parleying ain’t worth a hoot in hell now.

Let ’em come and—and—and try—” Kilden was almost done for, verging on collapse.

Samson Curp brought out a plain round gold box of snuff from a vest pocket. “Your name, my friend?”

Kilden lifted his nodding head. “K-Kilden.” Then he sagged down, head and shoulders, on the bar.

“Kil—” The tiny gambler almost dropped the snuff case. For an instant, his mouth jerked open. Then he had complete control, was repocketing the case. Swinging to summon his two housemen in. He warned the others to stay out.

“Get him,” he told the two men in black. “Take him to the place.” He went outside to Sweedy. “It’s all right. He’s going to my place.”

“Now wait, Curp. Wait a—”

“You heard me, Sweedy. I know him, I said.” There was the slow spatter of gunfire in the night from the rocks beyond the upper end of the Row. It was the fat Elby, unable to outrun his hunters, making a stand. “Better go up there and finish the job, Sweedy.” And Samson Curp headed down the alley, the throng opening a way for him again.

“Kilden,” he whispered to himself. “Kilden. It seems impossible. . . . Boots Kilden, the great Boots Kilden, returned from the grave. . . .”

CHAPTER III

WHEN Sam Kilden pushed open his eyes the next time, he tasted whisky in his mouth. First time he’d ever heard of them giving a horsethief a drink in a jailhouse. Shadowy figures moved about him and the lamp-light seemed to rise as his eyeballs cleared. First thing he saw was the neat clean bandaging around his bullet-nicked left forearm. His lifting eyes took in a window. He frowned, peered. There were no bars on the window.

Next to it, on the wall, hung a striking oil painting of an unbroke stallion rearing against the rope that held him to a corral snubbing post. Beyond that was another oil, a canvas of a coyote on a low mound under

a lemon scimitar of moon. They didn't have things like that in a cuartel, he knew.

"He's come around, doctor," a voice said. Samson Curp moved into Kilden's line of vision.

"Got to clean out that wound on his side. 'S an old one. Festering, too, Mr. Curp." The sawbones, a bearded goat of a man, wiped his spectacles and took an instrument from the black bag on the table.

Kilden tried to steel himself against the pain, but things went black again. When once more he came to, a hand was holding a fresh shot of whisky to his throat. Again the gray curtain peeled away from the room. Kilden realized his shirt had been removed. And a big patch of bandage, fresh bandage not those old rags that had been there, covered that wound over his ribs.

"A remarkable physical specimen for his age," the sawbones was saying as he washed his hands in a basin. On the table beside it was a pile of blood-stained cloths. "How a man of his years could keep going after the beating his body has taken is beyond me." The doctor shook his grizzled head.

KILDEN frowned weakly at that. Why he was just twenty-two and they talked as if he must be crowding forty. Somebody was locoed. He tried to speak but one of those black-garbed hombres poked a tailormade quiry into his mouth. Struck a match. Kilden sucked on the inhale with relish and took in the room. Even though he was half dead with fatigue, he couldn't help but note its richness; velvet drapes at the windows, heavy leather furniture, a deep soft carpet on the floor. In one corner stood a painter's easel.

"Where am I?" he got out in a heavy whisper.

"The Monte Carlo Gambling Hall. My personal quarters."

As Curp spoke, the sawbones turned to survey his patient, still amazed. "I still can't get over how a man of his years—"

"I'll send for you later if needed, doctor," Curp cut him short, smiling

slightly. Taking the hint, the sawbones picked up his bag and left.

"Give Kilden another drink," Curp ordered the black-garbed gent. "Then tell them to bring up that food as I ordered it."

Kilden was able to hold the glass himself that time. He had never tasted whisky like that before, hot yet rich, not the stinging rotgut they sold in the whisky mills. Though he was still weak, spent, he felt better. The old flesh wound in his side no longer throbbed. And it was half a relief that the fleeing had come to an end. They had him now, and that was that.

He spoke again. "I can't sabe why I'm here. When do I go to jail?" He waited while Curp took a pinch of snuff from the gold box, applied it to one nostril, then to the other. He sneezed and still didn't answer. Kilden felt anger creeping up in him. "Well? You know who I am. They call me a horsethief. I—"

"What's your first name?"

Kilden hated him then. "As if you didn't know. Sam Kilden. Sam. And what've you—you got me here for?"

Little Curp walked to a window and gazed down at the front road. When he turned around, he shook his head. "You aren't Sam Kilden. . . . No. You're Boots Kilden. . . . *If you want to stay out of jail, you're Boots Kilden.*"

WHILE he wolfed the food that had been brought up, Kilden thought. He went through the bowl of rich meat broth first, finally grabbing it up in his two shaking hands and draining it. Then he assaulted the big platter of steak flanked by fried eggs, washing down mouthfuls with gulps of hot java. When Curp asked him if he knew who Boots Kilden was, Sam Kilden merely nodded. Nobody but a fool would have to have been told who Boots Kilden was.

Boots Kilden was one of the most fantastic figures ever to stalk across the Southwest, a deadly shot to such an extent they said he must have been born with hoglegs in his hands. Leader of his own outfit, lobos, at sixteen. Married and a father at

seventeen. Quit the owlhoot to settle down and operate one of the biggest barrooms in the Oklahoma Territory, a place famed from Border to Border. Fire that destroyed the whole town wiped him out. That Kilden then became a gunman, hiring himself out to clean up helltowns. Twice he was left for dead, once when he was bush-whacked.

He seemed to have more lives than a cat, always bobbing up again. They called him the man who couldn't be killed. His wife had died and he didn't seem to care a damn any more, stalking through the world with a scornful disregard of danger that bordered on the inhuman. Folks marvelled at him, at how he never lost that boyish look. Black-headed, he never seemed to age. At thirty he could have passed for a button still in his teens.

Somehow, despite his past, he became a John Law, even a Special State's officer. Then, after a gent he had brought in and who had been hanged was found to have been innocent, Boots Kilden flung his badge in their faces and rejoined the owlhoot breed. Within a week, a certain politician said to have been involved in framing the innocent man was shot dead in his office in the State capital. A slim man with a pronounced drawl walked into the local newspaper office and told them all about it. After he left, a reporter going through some files pulled out a picture. It was a photograph of the man who'd just given them the details on the shooting, Boots Kilden.

He became a kind of sagebrush Robin Hood. A two-bit cowman about to lose a mortgaged outfit might wake up to find a bag of dinero tied to his gatepost. Any poor devil down on his luck could expect help from Boots Kilden. Once, some of his band were trapped in a schoolhouse which was set afire to drive them out. Boots himself, appearing like magic from nowhere as he had a trick of doing, rescued them. Later, the small poor township where the school was located received money with a note from Kilden explaining it was for a new schoolhouse. Two

weeks later, following the holdup of a gambling hall in the next county, another sum came. "To replace the school books for the children," Kilden said in his note.

The Law went half frantic in its attempts to bring him in, but the fabulous lobo had hundreds and hundreds of undercover allies in the little people across three states. They would tip him off about posses, traps that were set, about where the badge packers expected him to strike next. Like a phantom wolf, Kilden came and went, appearing where least expected. A lawman of a tiny settlement stumbled over him without his band at a girl's house once, slammed him in the local cuartel, left the jailor to guard him, and rode hellbent for the sheriff up the creek. When a posse of two score men returned to the settlement, Kilden was gone. So was the jailer who'd been left to guard him.

IT WAS always like that. The Law worked a hired killer into Kilden's bunch; the killer shot Kilden in his bunk one night and got away. He came down into Gin Creek Flats and boasted about the deed. The next morning, he was found dangling from a cottonwood across the creek, and when the sheriff promised to turn the country upside-down to find the perpetrators, forty odd men presented themselves at his office to claim the honor of having had a hand in the deed. Later it was learned that it was another gent who'd been sleeping in Boots Kilden's cot that night.

The one thing that marked the man were his boots. They were handmade, from Mexico, of the finest leather, fancy, the toes inlaid with silver designs. It was said he had more than a score of pairs. For when Kilden had first hit the owlhoot at sixteen, pulled his first job, he had been barefooted in the stirrups, too poor to afford boots. After that, they had become his single vanity.

And then, suddenly, he had quit the game and crossed the Rio to vanish in Mexico. It was after he watched his closest friend die as the

result of a gunshot wound. Boots Kilden said he was belly-sick of shooting and killing, had bid his men goodbye, and gone. A year later, news came across the Rio that the famed Boots Kilden had been killed, shot in the head by a wild bullet in a cantina brawl in which he had had no part.

That was the story. This Sam Kilden knew it pretty well. His late father, a mild dreamy-eyed man, had told him it once. It was the kind of a thing men talked about at campfires on the open trail under the stars. The name they mentioned in comparison when summing up the speed of other great gunslingers. Sam, though he happened to have the same surname, was no relation of the incredible Boots Kilden, he knew. His dad had told him so.

Now, he was being told to play the role of this Boots Kilden.

Finished eating, he lifted his head to meet Samson Curp's eyes. "What's the idee?"

The owner of the Monte Carlo rubbed the nose that dipped so uglily over his mouth. "Simple. You're Boots Kilden, returned from the dead—from Mexico. Folks will believe anything is possible for Boots Kilden. . . . And, as acting sheriff, Boots Kilden could clean up Saddle City, otherwise known as Hell's Last Stand."

Instinctively Sam Kilden rubbed an ear with his hand. What he had heard seemed like a marijuana-engendered dream. "Me—sheriff?"

"Say you'll be Boots Kilden—and I'll make you sheriff."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS about two in the morning when Kilden was wakened from his heavy deathlike sleep on the big leather sofa. Before he dropped onto it, Samson Curp had explained they'd have to strike while the iron was hot. Now, Kilden was somewhat refreshed though still weak after three hours of shuteye. Actually, after that good grub and the medical treatment, he felt like a new man in comparison to the shambling wreck he had been when he skulked into

Saddle City close on top of twilight.

Tiny Curp led him to a room in the back where there was a big tin tub of steaming water. Keeping his injured side out of it, the horsethief gave himself the first bath he could remember in a long time. It felt wonderful. While he soaped and scrubbed, Curp stood giving him enough details for the time being.

"Saddle City is a welter of gangs fighting for rule," the gambling house boss said, choosing his words carefully. "Sleeper Keys was boss of one element. Sweedy—he owns one of the biggest saloons in town—led another side struggling for power. A showdown had to come." Sweedy and his partners had hired the notorious Birdsall to come in and finish off Keys. It was obvious now that Keys had been forewarned. "They mistook you for Birdsall, Kilden."

The man in the tub nodded curtly. Though it was late, Saddle City was noisy, running wide open, with business doubled this night because of the excitement. The buzz from the main drag penetrated even to that little room.

"Now, as Boots Kilden," Curp went on, "your story is this. You came back to settle an old score with Sleeper Keys. Let us say he once double-crossed you. Yes, say that; Mr. Keys will not deny it. His voice is too weak. You came back; you killed him."

Kilden stood beside the tub, towelling himself. "But I'm not Boots Kilden. There'll be men who knew him or at least saw him. I—"

"I saw Boots Kilden. . . . You are slighter, but you are black-haired and look enough like him to be related. Sure you aren't?"

As Sam Kilden shook his head, he faintly heard his name being called out in the street. Curp smiled faintly.

"It's more than actual features. You've got that bleak wolfish look about you he had. . . . Well, anyway, folks already think you *are* him. Only Boots Kilden, they're saying, could have walked smack into Keys' own backyard and beaten him and two planted gunmen."

"But Boots Kilden is supposed to

be dead, Curp."

Curp shrugged. "A man like him could rise from the grave. Nobody around here actually saw him shot down; besides, there's that scar on your left temple."

"What about it?"

"Fine. Excellent. That was the shot that was supposed to have killed you. It knocked you unconscious, but it was only a glancing wound. Understand? That scar clinches it."

SAM KILDEN nodded slowly, but still dubious. It was a tempting thing, this being acting sheriff. He could stop running. He would have power, be safe. Safe for a spell, anyway. Of course, inevitably, the day would come when he would be unmasked. Still, he had nothing to lose, a smalltime outlaw like him. A frown jerked his brows together.

"But the difference in age," he said, remembering the doctor's talk.

"Boots Kilden was remarkable that way. He never looked anything near his age." Curp took some snuff fastidiously and sneezed heavily. "The salary is a hundred and fifty a month. It will be a tough job. But—clean up Saddle City and you get a bonus of five thousand—five thousand—from me."

It seemed incredible to Sam Kilden. He had crept in like a cur dog, stumbled into a gun trap, only come out alive because he had tried to steal some loose dinero. And here he was being offered a job as sheriff of the Saddle Rock country.

"How do you know I can be made sheriff?" he asked warily.

A faint twinkle came into Gambler Curp's eyes. "I've already taken steps. . . . Certain friends of mine are around sowing the seed and—" He paused, jerking his head toward the front road whence Kilden's name rose on the night afresh. "And though I can't stop the warring, I have certain power in this town."

Sam Kilden still smelled something wrong on the wind. The instinct of the hunted man warned him to be wary. "But these bands—men like Sweedy—they won't want to see a strong Law here. Why should they let you name a man they think could

rod it and—"

"A man who *will* rod it," Curp corrected him with an icy note in his voice. He explained why they would, why they had to. "It's the bank. I can break it. It was an extraordinarily ingenious arrangement. He was a very rich man. It was his money that represented fifty per cent of the assets of the Saddle City Stockmen's Bank. But Curp did not have his money on deposit there; it would have been too much of a temptation to knock off the bank to break him. His money was deposited up in the State bank at Hutchins but in such a manner that it stood to the credit of the local bank and could be used as security by them with his permission.

SAM KILDEN didn't understand the legal technicalities clearly, but he got the idea. This Samson Curp maintained the economy of Saddle City. A word from him and the local bank would go under, be unable to pay off.

"So, you see, if I suggest firmly to certain of the leading business men such as Barton Sweedy—very firmly—that Boots Kilden would make a good sheriff. . . ." He drew out the snuffbox again.

Kilden started to draw on his ragged clothes, appreciating for the first time how clever a gent this undersized mild-mannered gambler was.

"Wait," said Curp, halting him in his dressing. He led the way back to the Big front room.

There was a brand new outfit laid out for the fugitive horsethief. There was a maroon silk shirt, tight-legged gray pants, a white calfskin vest, a black Stetson, flat-crowned like Kilden's own, but a real beauty. And on the floor were several pair of expensive boots with silver decorations studding the toes.

"Try them for size," Curp directed. "Boots was always noted for his fine foot gear. Those are your own guns on the table. A trigger man like you always prefers his own personal tools, I know."

"Most every gent does."

"I wouldn't know." Curp made a

grimace of distaste. "I never carry a weapon. . . .When you get your breeches on, the barber will come up to shave you. And remember. You've been down in Mexico, outside Noca-zari, these last few years. That's where Boots died. I happen to know that."

Sam Kilden was slack-jawed for several moments. Curp seemed to possess some magic. He could produce almost anything needed. He seemed to know anything. But Kilden kept himself tight-reined a little longer.

"About this sheriff's job. Your men will be backing me, I reckon. And I'm to take my orders from you and—"

Curp walked up close to him quickly. "Neither I nor my gunmen back you. They are only here to run this house. Your job is to straighten out this hellhole—come Hell or high-water. I want no hand in any gun-play."

Sam Kilden nodded slowly.

"One final thing," Curp went on. "I'm putting you in, and I can keep you in. Staying alive is your own little problem."

"I sabe," Kilden said harshly at that cold-bloodedness.

"But, Kilden, I back winners. *Only winners*. When a man starts to lose. . . well, I lose interest. I pull out."

WITH a long unhurried stride, willowy body undulating gracefully, Jen Redall moved along one of Saddle City's main road plank walks. A grimace of faint disgust crossed her face as an ore-eyed cowpoke in the throng jostled backward into her. At once, one of her escorts sent the man spinning into the gutter with a sharp thrust of a stiff arm. Jen had four escorts. They were going down to see the famed Boots Kilden who, word had it, was due to appear downstairs in Samson Curp's place.

The woman had been in Saddle City exactly ten days before Kilden's arrival, and she had already begun to operate. The russet velvet suit that molded to her trim figure so perfectly was the gift of Old Parvis, a

retired cowman who liked to drop into the place and buy drinks for the girls. But he was just the start, only small bore stuff. Jen Redall was out after bigger game. Something like Barton Sweedy, for instance. He was after power, Jen had learned. She liked men who were after power; she could understand that. Her mouth stirred into a pout as a big brute of a man in a rich rig bent his eyes down on her in the throng on the sidewalk.

"They's a terrible mob in-front of the Monte Carlo, Miss Jen," one of her escorts said. They were bellied out into the road with a plowman cursing them vainly from his wagon seat. "We'll never get close."

"Here. Let's go up this way," another one of them said. "Mebbe we can get in the side door of Curp's place. I know one of his housemen pretty well. Eh—be careful of that mud there!"

The fourth escort, barely more than a beardless button, had a rush of courage, swung the slim girl up in the cradle of his arms, and splashed through the mud. He was too scared by his own brashness to speak. But Jen Redall, lying absolutely supine, let her clear gray eyes stare full into his. The kid was shaking like a leaf when he placed her back on her feet. Jen's mouth curved in an enigmatic smile. She had made another conquest, she knew. Perhaps, one day, she would be able to use this boy. One never knew.

They came in behind Samson Curp's place and got to the side door. No more customers were being admitted but a word to one of the black-garbed housemen and they were inside the long ornate place with its three-tiered fancy chandeliers. A couple of minutes later, resplendent in his new rig with the gray pants and maroon silk shirt, the so-called Boots Kilden came down the wide staircase beside Samson Curp.

THE crowd in the gambling hall cheered. Men peering over the half-leaf doors in front passed the word into the road and there was a fresh wave of sound. Curp touched Kilden's arm at the turn of the stairs,

pausing for the dramatic effect. Kilden, still probing, still on guard, spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"Real slick layout you got here, Curp. . . Wonder you wouldn't want to see your rivals in the town put out of business."

Samson Curp rubbed his long nose. "I have no rivals. . . There are other gambling establishments. The Monte Carlo is the big one. There are only big games here. The other places can have the crumbs. . . Samson Curp doesn't want that kind of business."

They came on down, moving slowly, Kilden still weak from his wounds but walking very straight. Jen Redall studied the newcomer to Saddle City coldly. A man's outfit meant nothing to her save as an indication of how much he might be worth. She scanned the face that wasn't handsome but that possessed a peculiar picaresque attractiveness, noted the strange youth for one of Boots Kilden's years. She took in the body with its unconscious feline grace. Her glance went back to the eyes.

"That man's been hungry," she told herself. "And he's been up against a wall in his time, too. . . He'd be hard to lead."

Then his glance, accidentally, met hers. Their eyes fenced, both of them going on guard inside as if measuring an opponent. An electric something passed between them.

"Kilden! Kilden!" roared the mob in the road, bellying forward en masse. "Bring him out!"

The customers in the Monte Carlo jammed back to open a path for the pair as they headed forward. A woman leaped out and grabbed Kilden around the neck to kiss him. He turned his cheek. In so doing, his eyes again met those of Jen Redall with the dark red hair. Her calm oval of face was as unreadably serene as ever. Then her wide mouth parted slightly in a half smile, the heavy lower lip momentarily loose. And Sam Kilden read evil, deep and secret, behind that smile even as he felt his blood leap in response to the mouth.

CURP took his arm to guide him through the doors. At sight of

the great Kilden, the man who had walked in single-handedly and settled with Sleeper Keys, the mob went wild. This was the fantastic incredible Kilden, the man who was a legend, the Robin Hood of the Southwest. They roared and roared as the light from a coal-oil torch played over his face.

"Make Kilden sheriff to clean up the town!" one man started the cry. Others quickly took it up. A man shinnied halfway up a tree trunk to lead them in the chant, waving his sombrero. "We want Kilden for sheriff! We want Kilden for sheriff! We want Kilden to clean up Saddle!"

Curp raised his hand finally to still them. "All right, boys," the gambling king said. "I'll call a meeting of the Citizens Committee to see if we can appoint him acting sheriff. We'll see." The Committee was composed of the leading business men of the town, including the barroom owners like Bart Sweedy. "You'll be wearing the badge in the morning," he told Kilden in an aside.

"What happened to the former John Law?" the latter asked.

"Died in office. Fatal case of lead poisoning."

"Why haven't you elected a new man?"

"No candidates; no man would have the job. Seems that they had ideas about a long life. . ."

ACCOMPANIED by her escorts, the strangely fascinating woman walked back to the Lucky Lode. Ben Clarritch, the good-looking flashily-dressed jewelry drummer, squeezed her arm. Jen gave no sign of feeling it. Then her head came up suddenly.

"I've seen him before. Yes. Not more than a year ago, too. I think—I think it was in Ajo, but I'm not sure," she said.

One of the men smiled, shook his head. "No, Miss Jen. You couldn't have. Boots Kilden just came back across the Line. He's been in Old Mex for years."

Jen Redall's jaw jutted. "I've seen him before. . ."

CHAPTER V

SWEAT ran in little rivers down the sides of Bart Sweedy's chinless face from beneath his greasy hair as he paced the smoke-blued backroom of the two-bit whisky mill across the creek from Saddle City. It was almost dawn and he had been drinking steadily ever since the killing of Sleeper Keys up in Whisky Row earlier that night. The whisky was almost literally leaking from his pores. Yet the rail-like hombre was steady on his legs and his voice unthickened by the vast quantity of alcohol he had consumed. Sweedy always doubled up on his drinking when he got mad.

And he was mad about that killing. He had wanted Keys dead all right, but he had wanted him slain by Bird-sall, the man he had hired, to demonstrate his power to Saddle City. Instead, this Kilden had to come out of the grave. And Samson Curp had practically adopted him. A couple of hours ago, Kilden had been appointed acting sheriff.

"I say the only thing to do is wait our chance and drygulch Kilden," said Ira Tanner, another barroom owner.

Sweedy spat disgustedly on the spur-slashed floor, started to swear. His hat hit one of the beams of the low ceiling and he broke off to launch a fresh string of oaths. His chinless face jerked vehemently as he flung them out.

"Ya tallow-headed fool! Burn down an idol like Kilden from behind and you'd have the whole town on your tail! By grab, Tanner, you're so dang dumb you wouldn't know how to pour water outa a boot if the directions was written on the heel!" He stormed up to the other end of the room. "I told you the governor—'cordin to a rumor—is thinking of investigatin' conditions here in Saddle. Put Kilden in his grave and the place'd be filthy with Special State officers!"

SWEEDY paced some more. The others seated around the table shifted restlessly. The bottle was

passed; smoke from quirlies and cigars wafted in thicker layers. Foreheads knit and mouths worked without speaking. They were worried about this Kilden being made acting sheriff, as he had been.

"Well, Samson Curp says with law and order in Saddle, *amigos*, business would be better for all of us. More dinero for everybody, he says," slowly enunciated Vasco Jones. Jones was half Mexican, owned two eating places in Saddle as well as a livery barn plus being a partner in the hay and feed store.

The others were all business owners in Saddle City too, with the exception of the one who was Sweedy's tophand gun-slick. There was Slow John Wing who also had a saloon in Saddle; Cal Byman who owned the Saddle City-Teconah stage-line; Bortley, boss of a dancehall and a money lender on the side; Link Thomas, handsome and weak for the women; he ran his father's General Merchandise Store. And Dockers, owner of a small spread up the valley with none too clean a reputation as brands went. Others.

"Samson says. . . Samson Curp says," mimiced Sweedy in answering Vasco Jones. "And who the hell is Samson Curp?" The richest man in Saddle. He's got his, so he don't want to see anybody else get any more because they might git as big as he thinks he is! Samson Curp!"

Nobody replied to him. There was some uneasy shuffling. Some of them didn't want to be there, but they had no choice. Sweedy bossed the show; this was the band he had formed to grab power in Saddle City. They took his orders and they contributed dinero for the hire of trigger slammers. Some of them had protested in the beginning, had tried to stay out. Then they had run into trouble in their places. Strange saddle stuffs drifted in and started brawls. There were thefts, disorders that ruined their trade. Twice every horse was stolen from the livery barn Vasco Jones owned and he'd had to make good to the owners. If a man wanted to stay in business, he found it wiser to come over to Barton

Sweedy's side once the latter had invited him. That's the way it was.

"Whisky Row won't take this lying down," said young Link Thomas. "And that Kilden's going to be hell on enforcing law and order, by grab! He—"

THERE was a furtive rap on the door of the back room. Sweedy nodded to his gun guard, easing one of his own hoglegs half out of a holster. When the door was opened it was to reveal another of Sweedy's gun hawks. The man had been snooping around up in Whisky Row.

"They're holding a meeting too," he told his boss. "Up in the Row, seems like they believe you hired this Kilden as well as Birdsall. They're blaming you for the death of Sleeper Keys, boss."

Sweedy drew up his pole-thin bony frame. "Yeah? Who's running that meeting of theirs?"

"Christman."

"Him? That lop-eared loose-jawed wingbag? Hell, we got nothing to worry about. . . Hey, Jed, wait." He walked over to the man. "That cousin of yours still up there in the Yellow Pony Hills?" When the man said he was, Sweedy clapped him on the shoulder. "See me in the morning. Mebbe I'll have a message for you to take to him."

When Jed had gone, Sweedy faced the room, his birdlike face working with excitement. "Gents, I think I know how we'll handle the little problem of Boots Kilden. I—think—I—know." He pulled a cigar stub from a vest pocket and fired it up. "I think I know how we'll handle Kilden. After all, he was once an outlaw, wasn't he?"

"A different kind of a wan," put in Vasco Jones.

"Still, an outlaw. At heart, a thief!" Sweedy smashed a fist into an open palm. "So we'll play him that way. Once an outlaw, always an outlaw at heart. Now, that Jed's cousin. . . ."

Jed's cousin, he told them, was one Red Norman, a rustler who had drifted up from the Rio with his bunch when things got too hot for

them down that way.

"We can use him. We'll bring him in here and let him start operating. Then we'll have him approach Kilden with a proposition of a split. Boots Kilden will jump at it, being an ex-outlaw himself. And then we'll have him!" Sweedy did a dance step on the floor in exultation. "Then, by grab, we'll have him as a double-crossing John Law!"

CHAPTER VI

THE LUCKY LODGE was closed for the night. It had been named that when Ben Lucian originally opened it as a gambling hall. Business had fallen off and he had brought in some dance-hall girls plus a three-piece orchestra. And then he had brought in this Jen Redall, whom he had seen in a town up at the north end of the state, to sing. He had sensed it when he first saw her, that peculiar something she had without possessing a flaunting beauty. It was something behind her casual matter-of-fact way of singing. And since she had arrived, business had picked up heavily. Now, Lucian sat at a table in the quiet place having a drink with her and his son, Gil.

When he looked at Gil, Lucian sighed inwardly. The boy was good-looking in an almost effeminate way but as weak as they came. The soft-curved self-indulgent mouth beneath that thin streak of black mustache told the whole story. Lucian sighed again and let his eyes rest on the woman, Jen. Resigned to a lonely half-invalided middle age, he had felt a new interest in life since she had come to the place. Lucian himself was a great mass of flesh of almost two hundred and sixty pounds with a dangerously bad heart. Doctors had warned him against undue exertion or excitement. No female had looked at him with interest in a long time.

Then, suddenly, he realized that Jen Redall's gray eyes were sparkling at him over the top of her glass.

"What's so funny?" he asked wheezingly.

"Nothing," she said gravely. "Noth-

ing."

He said, "Then what are you laughing at?"

Jen shrugged in the low-cut ma-roon evening dress she wore. "I wasn't laughing."

THERE was something in the gray eyes that fascinated him now, but he assumed truculence. "If they's something funny about me, say so." He dusted the stub of his cold cigar on the plate.

She held a match for it. "There's nothing *funny* about you, Mr. Lucian. Nothing. Far from it. A man as impressive as you and. . . Oh, well, I guess you know. You must have attracted plenty of girls in your time."

"'Impressive'?" he repeated slowly. "Shucks, I'm just a big fat cow waiting for death to catch up with me."

"Yes, big! That's the word, Ben." She used his first name with calculated softness. "Who wants these little flap-jawed pipsqueaks anyway? Most of them haven't lived long enough to tell the time of day. A woman likes a man who has had experience, who has seen life, a man like you, Ben." She reached over and refilled his glass from the bottle, her hand brushing his as she did it.

He was still trying to be wary but he drowned half the stiff drink in a swallow. "What makes you think I used to attract women, Jen?"

She looked enigmatic as she smoothed back the red hair. "I didn't say *used* to attract them. . . . Ben. Anyway, I've heard some of the girls who work for you talk. And—well, I'm a woman myself, after all. I have feelings, feelings that I try to deny sometimes. But. . . ."

Lucian patted down his gray cravat and sucked on his cigar and studied her. A gleam came into his eyes. Jen Redall hummed a soft haunting love ballad under her breath. He leaned closer to catch the words. She lifted her eyes and looked full into his bloodshot ones and something like an electric shock jumped through him. He finished his drink and watched with a fatuous look as she poured him a fresh one. It would

be nice to have her close to him, pouring his drinks. He could slip an arm about her slight waist and—

"Gil!" He looked over at his son who was busily polishing his finger nails on a coat sleeve. "Better go around and see if I locked up everywhere' 'specially the shed out in the back."

Gil put aside his banjo, said "Hunh?" and then nodded as he rose. It was all right with him. He'd have an excuse to slip outside and maybe meet one of the dancehall girls from one of the other places as she came home late. He was always running after a pretty face. This Jen; he liked her, but he was afraid of her. She had put him in his place when she first came onto the job. And there was something else about her, something behind the demure cast of the face, that scared him. He went out the back way after checking on the shutters of a side window.

BEN LUCIAN had another drink. He and Jen talked softly, intimately. He put a plump hand on her shoulder. It made her curl inside but she concealed her reaction. She felt she had to work swiftly. She had not expected this Boots Kilden to come into the picture, and intuition told her he might get in the way of her plans. Like some of the men in Saddle City, Jennifer Redall wanted position and power and money too.

When Lucian kissed her bare arm, she jerked away sharply. "Don't—don't do that, Ben. It—it does too much to me. I—I should be getting to bed, anyway."

"Wait." He clutched her arm desperately. He was like a man who had been returned to the living. He had not imagined for years that a woman—and a young attractive girl like this—could feel for him. His heavy voice came hoarsely from the depths of the massive hulk of flesh that he was. . . . He panted for breath, face growing purplish as his excitement mounted and taxed his feeble heart.

"Wait, Jen. . . . Listen. Maybe I haven't much longer to live. And—well, I'm mighty well fixed. You—you could have lots of things—more

money by a heap than you're getting now—and things if we could be—well, real good friends." His chair scraped as he shifted closer to her to put his arm around her waist. "I want affection, a woman like you to—to like me." His wheezing breath fanned her neck. "You know what I mean, Jen?"

She turned shocked eyes on him, feigning astonishment. "Ben—I—I never dreamed of—"

He grunted another promise. "I'll change my will. You'll be left a pretty penny, Jen. That Gil's a weak fool anyway. He'd lose it all. You'll get something, something nice. You—why you won't even have to work any more if you don't want to. And—and we can have such fun together. Say yes!"

She put an arm around on his shoulder. "Ben—Ben, I can't resist you! I can't!" But she avoided his heavy lips with her mouth and let him kiss her cheek instead. Then she was up and out of his arms. "No—no, you mustn't, Ben. Not here!"

Nimble she darted over to the stairs that ran to the balcony of the second-floor living quarters. Turned a minx-like provocative smile over her shoulder. "Catch me, Ben! You've got to catch me first, Ben-n. . . ." She swung up the steps.

Lurching from the chair, half drunken from the stiff drinks he had downed in rapid succession in his excitement he came after her. Halfway up the flight, she pretended to trip and he almost caught her. Then she again darted away from him, along the balcony and into the dim corridor leading to the back of the building and the rear stairs. Careening off a wall, he called heavily after her in the darkness, the effort almost choking him. Her mocking laughter came back to him from ahead.

"Catch me, a man has to catch me, Ben!"

She did not turn in at any of the rooms as he expected. Then he heard her light feet on the rear stairs. Or, at least, it sounded that way. Those back stairs ran down from the side of the hall at the end, narrow stairs and steep. He saw her at the bottom of

them, smiling tauntingly back up at him, skirts lifted to run on. He lunged down, blind to all else but his eagerness to get to her.

BUT Jen didn't flee any further. Turning suddenly, with a single puff she blew out the little lamp on the wall bracket at the foot of the flight. The stairs were plunged in darkness, and Ben Lucian never had seen the small stool laid across the stairs part way down. One of his boots hit it and he lost balance. The whole two hundred and sixty pounds of him went into the air and came on down headfirst. It sounded like a landslide. He hit on the bottom, on the first floor, with a crash that rocked the building. That was the only noise he did make. Neither moans nor oaths came from his throat. He couldn't have made either; his neck was broken.

Jen Redall saw that when she quickly relighted the lamp. He lay face down, head twisted at a crazy angle that would have been impossible with an intact spine. She stooped to listen for his breathing. There was none. She was already replacing the little stool in the hallway at the top of the stairs when Gil Lucian, who had just let himself in at the front, called out.

"What was that? Pop? Jennifer, Miss Jennifer, where are you?"

When he got up there, she was sobbing and pointing down the rear flight at the body. Gil Lucian looked as if he would be sick for a moment. When he got down there, one look told him his father was dead.

"He was chasing me," Jen Redall explained it, shoulders shaking. "He—he went crazy. I was scared. We had been flirting. But—but I never expected he'd go so wild." She told of running down the hall and jumping into a rear room. Then of hearing the crash. "He must have had a heart attack on the stairs and—and fell."

Gil could hardly believe it. He fussed with his dudish mustache on his now ashen face. "B—but Pop knew how bad his heart was. I—I can't understand—I can't understand how he'd run like that and—and—"

Their eyes met, Jen's long gray ones perfectly dry and cold. "You don't think I pushed him, do you? Why would I?"

"Why, no. N-no. But—"

"And you own the Lucky Lode outright now, don't you? That's the way you told me his will was written. Well, don't you?"

He mopped at his forehead. "Why, sure, yeah. I—I own the place."

Jen Redall drew herself up "And we'll run it together. We'll both make money, a lot of money, Gil"

He swallowed, then stared back. "We'll run it—why, say, I own this place now. I—"

HER eyes were like levelled stones. "We'll run it, I said. I take half the profits. Or maybe you'd rather be questioned by the Law and face an irate mob of citizens. Your late father was well liked, you know."

The weak Gil was dumbfounded. He gurgled before he could get out words, gesturing vaguely, senselessly. "I? Me face the Law? But you just said—y-you—you just told me how he died and—"

"And I'm the only one who knows how he did die. But you and your father have had two arguments in public this week, Gil. Everybody knows—when they hear about the will—you could have had a motive, too. It would be my word against yours. And out here in the West, a woman's word is never questioned. . . I think we'll be partners, secretly, Gil. I—take—half."

He stared at her frigid exterior like a man plumb smack-dab up against a stone wall. He tried to draw himself up and scowl. It didn't come off. He finally whispered wildly, "By Gawd, I believe you did kill him somehow."

Her smile was withering. "Don't be a bigger fool than you were born, man. Of course I didn't. Everybody knew your father had a bad heart. . . But I'm smart enough to take advantage of a situation. I've worked hard in my life, and I intend to get somewhere. Anyway, he was going to give men part of the place."

He wavered, unconsciously recoil-

ing a step. "I still got a feeling that somehow you—"

"Idiot! How could a slim girl like me kill a brute like he was?"

"I don't know. But I got a good idea to go to the Law and tell them how you're demanding half the—"

"Go ahead—and see who they believe. Remember, I don't know where you were when this happened. You could have been on the back stairs. Perhaps you were jealous of your father over me." She shrugged as she placed her cards with the icy viciousness of a killer. "Can you prove where you were?"

His eyes jumped guiltily. He tried to firm his mouth. But before the battery of her stony stare, he finally broke.

"Half the profits for me," she said. "And I'll see we make more money than you ever could have."

And he broke, shoulders dropping and mustached upper lip working. "All—all right. You win. Half the profits. But I'm still suspicious that you might have—"

"Haven't you got the place you would have waited years for?"

His eyes took on a shrewd light. "Well-l, yes."

"Then get down to the sheriff's office and report his death so they'll have nothing to suspect you about, Gil!"

He moved toward the front to obey, not yet fully aware he had sold himself into thralldom. . . .

CHAPTER VII

KILDEN strode back into the two-story block of yellowed dobie jail building, unbuckled his heavy-weighted shell belt, sat down at the rolltop sheriff's desk, and proceeded to clean the weapon he had so lately used. It was the night of his second day as acting sheriff. He had just had his first trouble, a gun ruckus in a little joint down by Barton Sweedy's big whisky mill. A gun tough named Del Willows had gone on the prod. Word had reached Kilden in time. He had strode in there, jumped Willows who was with two friends. Jumped

him fast and put a bullet in his shooting wing before anybody could do anything.

It had been blunt decisive action, harsh straight-from-the-shoulder justice so promptly executed trouble was side-tracked before it could build. Up and down the main drag, in the side-road bars, they were talking about the new law boss with awe and respect. Saddle City might actually know order mighty soon. The wounded Willows' nerve had run out his boots like sand. When Kilden had warned him to be quit of Saddle before next sun-up, he had sworn he would be. Samson Curp had come out of the Monte Carlo to personally congratulate Kilden.

But down in Sweedy's *Redeye Palace*, Sweedy was nodding sagely to a few cronies. "That's just the start. Uh course, Willows should've done a better job for the dinero I paid him, but that's just the start. They's going to be plenty of trouble, trouble and more of it in Saddle for that lawman. Norman the rustler is my big ace, but I got a heap of cards to play. Wait. . ."

Back in the jailhouse, Hare, the young eager-eyed deputy, surveyed the new boss admiringly across the desk. Kilden had two deputies, he had learned. The other was an experienced hand named Ruchter, a hard-bitten gent in his middle thirties, the type who made it a business to work for the Law. But what he had seen in Saddle had turned him cynical. He didn't expect to see any man, not even the reknowned Boots Kilden, clean it up. Ruchter simply intended to see that he didn't catch any lead himself. Kilden understood his breed; he wasn't sure he'd even trust him in a tight. Hare was different; he packed nerve and was hopeful and ready to follow a real leader.

"You sure did a bang-up job down there, Mr. Kilden," he said admiringly. "You cracked down on that Willows afore he knew what hit him."

"Yeah?" Well he's small-bore stuff anyway." Kilden calmly worked an oily rag into the muzzle of his Colts.

"You sure whipped your gun fast.

You threw it on him like it was part of your hand."

"It was him or me." Kilden checked the chambers to make certain they were empty, then checked the trigger action.

AFTER a little, Hare went out. Kilden wiped sweat from his neck; it was a hot humid night with big thunderheads stacking up over the ridge barrier that marked the east side of the Saddle country range. Kilden let his gaze range around the lamplighted office, swing to the corridor running to the stairs. In one of the cells above, that breed in on a charge of stealing some table beef broke out afresh into his sad tuneless singing. Sam Kilden could still hardly believe he was here in his capacity. He never had expected to see the inside of a jail save as a prisoner.

He had skulked into Saddle to steal. And now, he realized, if he hadn't started to reach for that dinero on the table at Keys' place, it probably wouldn't have happened, this being made acting sheriff. If he had not started for the money as Keys said those words about it, he himself wouldn't have made the gunplay that put him here. And they doubtlessly would have learned he was not Birdsall, the hired killer. He fired up a quirly thoughtfully.

Outside a woman passed through a splash of torchlight with two men. He recognized her as Jennifer Redall who worked at the Lucky Lode. His first morning here he had gone down there to check on the death of the proprietor. Somebody had said at the time that that was Saddle's sixth straight day of at least one death. But of course that had been no killing.

His young mouth tightened around the cigaret. Well, there had been no way it could have been a killing. Still, there was something about that woman. A hunch more than anything else told him her usually demure smile masked a cold ruthlessness. Through the barred window he watched her move from sight, mentally noting that every time he had seen

her she was escorted by men, usually several.

His thoughts ranged back to the events preceding his arrival in Saddle, leap-frogged still further back to his boyhood, to how he had become the kind of hombre, wanted by the Law, he was. His resemblance to the famed Boots Kilden still amazed him as his eyes dropped to the fancy boots inlaid with silver. Because, after all, as his dad had told him several times, their family was no relation to Boots Kilden, gunman and onetime lawman.

Sam Kilden couldn't remember his mother. It seemed she had died when he was very young. His dad. . . His eyes slivered up as if to mask even his thoughts from some cursory glance. His dad had been a gentle lovable man with a two-bit ranch and a great love for horses, had raised him carefully and with great affection as if to make up for the lack of a mother, had always preached gentleness to him, warning him against the violent whiplash of a temper packed in his frame.

Then, one day, the shock had come. It was when his dad was away on one of his "little business trips," as he called them. A posse led by a deputy had ridden up. They wanted Dad Kilden, said he was a horsethief. In his rage, Sam Kilden had yanked a gun and shot the deputy through the leg. Then he had had to flee for it, riding for the broken country beyond the desert strip. The worst shock had come then. A friendly neighboring rancher who helped him escape told him the charge was true. His father had been a horsethief.

SAM KILDEN had been hounded and hunted after that for gunning the John Law. He had tried to take the straight trail, but when he got work, sooner or later, the story caught up with him. It seemed at times as if he were perpetually riding on over the horizon. Twice folks had tried to turn him in for the puny reward. Once he had heard a man in a General Store telling about the hanging of Dad Kilden and young Sam had half killed the gent with his bare hands before he had been

dragged off him. And it had been flight again.

A band of rustlers had saved him when he got cornered that time, and he had ridden with them for a considerable spell afterward, embittered, giving up all hope of going straight. Then, a few days ago, over in Big Gin River, he had been spotted again. This time it was by a saloon tough from back home who was hungry for bounty money. Sam Kilden had winged him after the other had tried to jump him first with his gun. Cut off from his own pony, he had grabbed the first horse handy.

That had made him a horsethief like his father. He discovered they had branded him that as he rode wildly with a posse hot on his coat tails. And now—now he was sheriff of Saddle City, posing as the great Boots Kilden.

He rose and went to the window at the side, staring sightlessly up toward the white double-galleried Grand Hotel. He had to come to a decision. His bleak eyes turned bitter. This looked like a chance to make himself, to go straight if he lived through it. But he knew better.

The day would come when he would be recognized. It might be another John Law, somebody who knew Sam Kilden, son of a horsethief. Or it might be by a man who had ridden with the noted and real Boots Kilden himself. Somebody like that latter was bound to turn up. Then he would be exposed, run out, if not turned over to the Law himself. He shook his head again. No, there was no use. It might be days, even weeks. True. But in a hellhole roost like Saddle City, all kinds came down the trail. Time was against him. It was only a question of how long before the sands in the glass ran out.

He had to find some other answer than to play it straight.

"Whew!" Squat Ruchter waddled in on his bandy legs and headed for the water bucket in the corner. "Things is too danged quiet in Whisky Row tonight, boss."

Kilden buckled on his hoglegs again and went out to look over Sad-

dle in the flare of the coal-oil torches of the dancehalls and whisky mills and gambling joints. His wounded side bothered him little now. His bullet-nicked left forearm was only slightly stiff as a memento of the fight in Whisky Row. It was good to be clean and well-fed, togged out in a real rig. It was good not to be running. This would have been a slicker-than-slobbers setup for a gent handy with his gun irons and packing some nerve.

But it wasn't for him. Not for long, at least. . . .

THREE days later he woke in the bare room behind the sheriff's office in the jailhouse to stare out at a rain-drizzling morning and knew he had the answer. Whisky Pender, the gnarled old jailor, stuck his head in the door to say that Mr. Curp the gambler was out front to see the sheriff. Pulling on a pair of jeans and his fancy boots, Kilden knuckled sleep from his heavy eyes and went out.

He had slept late after having ridden the better part of the night. His wounded side was quite sore now from that much saddle work. There had been a short gunfight in Whisky Row. Nobody had been seriously hurt but the aged town barber, an innocent passerby, who now lay between life and death. The whisper was that a couple of Sweedy's toughs had gone in there and started the ruckus. But they had hit the saddle and made it into the brush-choked mesquite-thicketed flats some miles below Saddle before Kilden reached the scene. The rain that came after midnight had completely obliterated any trail, and Kilden had no evidence to connect Bart Sweedy with the hombres.

When he and Hare rode back in a little after dawn empty handed the word had jumped around quickly. And the mutterings and complainings mounted even as they gulped some breakfast with the town's business life just taking down its shutters. Seemed like the same old disorders and frequent shooting brawls were to still be routine in Saddle. That

was the general tenor of their words. So Kilden figured Samson Curp had come to enter a complaint.

As he entered the office, the fastidious boss of the Monte Carlo was just applying a second pinch of snuff to his nostrils. He sneezed and said good morning with a calm smile.

"Picked up a tip from a source of mine—from several sources, as a matter of fact, Kilden," Curp went on. "And I thought you ought to know. Gun toughs, strangers, are easing into town on the quiet. By the ones and twos. I can't find out who is bringing them in. But they're coming, and they are newcomers' here."

Kilden nodded. "Thanks, Curp. Things sure aren't due to get any better right soon, I reckon."

"No. This is hardly an overnight job, sheriff. Too bad you couldn't get those men last night."

Kilden agreed with a dropping of his eyelids as he fired up a smoke, said nothing. He waited for the criticism.

CURP fingered the gold snuff box. "It was hardly to be expected. The whole incident was undoubtedly planned by somebody interested in seeing more disorder, and their get-away would be planned in advance, too."

He left. Kilden watched the incredible little man get into the buckboard outside. The driver was one of his stony-faced black-garbed house guards. They went on up the road for the open country beyond the town.

A big slouching man with a bandage around his head and a bleary-eyed look pushed open the door. He was, he said, a horse-breaker from over Nerido way. Said he'd been clubbed and rolled for his dinero up in Whisky Row last night. Woke up this morning in an alley. They'd even taken the silver spurs from his boots.

"Were you drinking?" Kilden asked a little wearily.

The man rubbed a bearded jaw. "Well, I had a few."

Kilden gave the man a dollar for breakfast—Curp had already handed

him, very casually, a couple of hundred to run on—and said he would look into it. But he knew there was little he could do. The only final answer would be to wipe out Whisky Row, to clean out the denizens of every tough joint in the big range town.

His thoughts switched back to Samson Curp. Curp had put his finger on it when he'd said it would be no overnight job to clean up Saddle. That was why he, Kilden, couldn't stay and try to collect the five thousand for the task. More than ever, he knew the answer he had wakened with was right.

It was to wait as long as he dared. To watch for a chance to double-cross the Law at a price or to grab some bunk of dinero or booty, and light out. That was what he would do. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS that day that the first report of rustling came in from the broad plains above Saddle. It was a cowhand from the Rafter-H who rode in to report it. About a hundred head had been driven through cut fence up on the Old Man's north section, one of the Rafter-H spread receiving a slight wound when he came upon the rustlers.

"Did they leave any sign?" Kilden asked, leather-hued skin tightening as he sensed he had more trouble on his hands.

The man shook his head. The wounded man had come in with the news and a bunch from the bunkhouse had hit the saddle leather. But by the time they got out to the spot, there wasn't much to follow. "We figure they run 'em into one of them sandy river beds leading to the Sentinels."

The Sentinels was the long barrier ridge of saw-toothed chopped-off peaks bounding the plains of the Saddle cow country on the east.

"'S the only way they could safely git the stuff out," the man explained, gnawing the end of a tobacco-browned mustache. "If they went fer the north, they'd leave plain sign, and

they'd be spotted by the other outfits too easy. To the west, they's the desert. So. . . ."

That last was a question. Kilden said he'd be out as soon as he could. He couldn't leave Saddle then, not with that seething feeling under the surface and somebody running in gun slicks. He saw the hope die in the cowhand's eyes. They expected great things of the famed Boots Kilden. But night was already settling; and Saddle had to be watched.

IT WAS when he was on one of his patrols that he dropped into the Lucky Lode on the side street, hands thumb-hooked in his gunbelt. The knuckles of the right were red and slightly skinned. In a honky tonk down the line, an orey-eyed freighter had pulled a knife on a gent. Kilden had simply stepped in and felled the man with a blow, then ordered his friends to get him out of town.

As the sheriff sidled unostentatiously along the wall beside the emptied dance floor, a hush fell over the place. Jen Redall came around the edge of the stairs and stepped onto the upper end of the floor to sing. The three-piece orchestra with the tinny piano struck up. She was a picture, not striking at first, but somehow like a clear-etched cameo in the long gray dress, high-cut. It was slit over the tops of her shoulders so just an inch of flesh showed. Above that, her dark red hair was drawn severely back to a knot at the rear, gleaming sleekly in the flickering lamplight. She parted her lips to sing, then paused.

An impatient yet graceful gesture with her hand and the pianist eased down from his thumping. Her voice flowed over the place and Kilden felt himself stiffen. The voice was low yet carried throughout the place. And it had a teasing don't-care quality as if she were almost unaware of her audience. At moments, when the voice became almost throaty, her lids lowered drowsily. It was as if she were challenging every man in the place to awaken her, to make her aware of him as a male. And yet,

somehow, as she stood motionless, hands on her slim hips, her face had a little-girl look about it.

When somebody nearby whispered with a giggle, Sam Kilden found himself wanting to slap them in the mouth. Jen ended her song and he realized he couldn't remember a word of what she'd sung. He shook himself like a dog emerging from water, remembered his job, and checked on the gents around the place. He was surprised to see grayish Byman, owner of the stageline, over at the bar. Byman was noted for spending seven nights a week playing draw poker. Over at a table, there was young Link Thomas, son of the big General Store owner too. One of the dancehall hussies had her head on his shoulder, but he ignored her completely as he sat with his bright eyes fixed on Jen Redall. Kilden failed to see his deputy, Phil Hare, step behind a post guiltily, then slip from the place by a side door.

Jen began to sing again, "Kansas City Sal" that time. The applause was even louder when she finished that one. She smiled and started to leave the floor. Men shouted and stomped. A big horse trader ran out with a bottle of wine and a glass. The red-haired woman took a sip, poured demurely, then returned to sing once more. It was a love ballad.

WHEN she finished that time, Kilden walked out and inhaled the night air deeply. Back home, when he was just a beardless button, he had wooed a hoeman's daughter down the creek. But now he realized that had been nothing, just the mooning of a calf of a boy over a girl with yellow pigtails. He must have been mistaken in his first appraisal of this Jen Redall the night he came down the stairs at Curp's place, he told himself. Suddenly he felt regretful that he would be quitting Saddle shortly.

He didn't hear the splash of gunfire from Whisky Row a few minutes later. Some orey-eyed cowhand was swaying atop the watering trough in front of the bank, triggering away with two guns at the

smudged yellow stars. Kilden went over, took his hardware away from him, and booted him down the road. Then a man came running down out of the narrow Row, shouting that there was trouble. The new Law boss of Saddle went knifing through the main drag throngs, jumped up onto a buckboard and across it to get to the Row.

The quaking one-eyed man from the Row, a barroom swamper, explained excitedly. "Some gent—a strange feller—drygulched ol' Doc Pettus. They—they got the feller panned in an alley when he tried to git away. He—"

Already a roar was gathering through the crowd, a welling cacophony of anger like the forerunner of a storm. The aged doctor was universally loved even in tough violent Saddle City, he and his crippled daughter. Even in his short stay there, Kilden had learned to recognize the wizened little man as he hurried along the street with his battered black bag, hurried to ease the pain of some suffering mortal. Old Doc Pettus treated them all, the gunmen and the well-to-do citizens and the poor hussies. And if a person couldn't pay, Doc would just shrug it off, say, "Some other time, mebbe." His one weakness was to go on a spree occasionally. They usually lasted a few days, then they would carry him home and his daughter would take care of him.

He had evidently been on one of them when he had been shot.

"Let's go in there and git them dirty snakes!" a man bellowed. "Let's clean 'em out an'—"

Kilden stepped over and gave the man a straight-armed thrust in the chest that sent him stumbling back into the throng. "I ain't appointed you my new deputy yet, fella!" he said sharply but without excitement. "I still happen to be the Law here. Everybody stay out of the Row."

He turned and strode up the alley-like street between the shacks and hovels of Whisky Row, the dim-lit honky tonks that crouched like lurking animals behind either gutter. And he was trying to explain to himself

why he had done this. It didn't make sense. He could have let the mob go in and vent its rage on the denizens of the place. Plenty of blood would have been spilled. He could have claimed he was helpless to stop them.

But that wouldn't have solved anything. There were the words of the swamper that none of their people in the Row had done it. And it wasn't logical anybody would have gunned old Doc; no sense to that. Unless—unless they wanted it blamed on the Row. It hit Kilden smack between the eyes as he pushed up the rough grade past the place where he had put out Sleeper Keys' light. He was acting as a real honest-to-the-bone John Law would.

AS THE grade steepened, the Row bent. Ahead Kilden made out a little bunch of men opposite an alley. Near them, on the porch of a miserable little cabin, lay Doc Pettus' body.

"He's down there in the alley sheriff," one of the bunch called at sight of Kilden and his star. "And he ain't none of us, I swear."

The lawman hauled one of his black-buttled hogsles, peering down the alley. It was long and narrow between a shed and another building. They told him that the killer, escape cut off, had backed down it. And he had taken one Montana Joe, a card sharp, with him as a human shield. They couldn't get at him from the back end of the alley because behind that side of Whisky Row, the ground dropped off sharply to the creek below.

"We threw a few hunks uh lead at him as he went into the alley," one man said. "But when we tried to follow in, he was still shooting. So I reckon we didn't git him er he'd uh—"

Kilden advanced, his left hand sliding to the thigh holster and coming up with the shiny black butt gripped. He cocked both guns and called into the alley:

"Fella, you can come out alive! . . . Or I come in and you'll come out dead!"

He thought he caught some faint sound from back there. But no words reached him. So he went in, thumbs

poised on cocked gun hammers. One of his boots struck a tin can noisily, but nothing happened. He got to the rear of the alley where the shorter building ended. Over on his left back of that building, in the glow of the moon, lay the two bodies on the creek bank in the scrubby grass. Instinctively Kilden ducked back. But there was no crash of lead. He moved out again, went closer.

The bigger man, flat-bodied and wide-shouldered, lay nearer the building. There was a moist red splotch on his checkered shirt where he had been shot in the side. But his legs twitched and he breathed heavily; he wasn't dead. And the moon played fully on his cruel broken-nosed face with its vicious little lit of mouta. Kilden felt the sweat start all over him.

He knew the man and the man knew him. It was Yurca Joyce, an outlaw, who had ridden with that rustler outfit when he had been with them. Kilden didn't know what to do. It had come, the day when an homore would slope in who knew either the real Boots Kilden or him.

Automatically he turned to the other, a short plump gent in rich garb, obviously the gambler, Montana Joe. He lay half on his side. The sheriff pushed him flat to see how badly he was hit. Kilden had waster time being gentle. Shot dead center through the chest, Joe had gone to meet his ancestors. The story was plain. Feeling himself going down, the drygulcher had shot the card sharp.

And then sheriff noticed something else. In his death spasm, Montana Joe had clawed at his chest, ripping open his coat and tearing apart his shirt. Next to his skin was a fat-packed money belt.

KILDEN bent and pulled open one of its pouches. Inside was a wad of neatly folded goldback bills. One hundred dollar bills. He opened another. There was another bunch of hundreds. Pushing the dead man's shirt wider, he tore at other pouches. There were more packs of hundreds.

Throat suddenly dry, he stood up and peered over the twenty odd foot drop to the half dry creek below. Nodded. It was the only way. He had

to get out now, had to run again. Yucca Joyce would recognize him when he came to. And there were thousands in that dead gambler's money belt. He could take it, roll the body over the bank into the creek and then—

There was a noise behind him. He whirled.

"Just me, sheriff," called one of Samson Curp's black-garbed house guards. He was coming down from beyond the alley. He had cut in from the Row further up the line to cover Kilden's back.

The latter spoke automatically, woodenly. It was too late to make his getaway with that dinero now. "The gambler's got a Boothill claim already staked. Jo—the other one is hit and half unconscious."

Curp's man looked down at the bushwhacker scornfully. "I'll get a coupla men from out front. We can slip him down to the jail by the lane behind the main street afore the crowd knows it. Don't look as if he's hit serious."

Samson Curp, who seemed to know everything almost before it happened, was waiting in the jail office when they toted him in the rear door of the building. Joyce listened unintelligibly as they laid him on the cot in the office. Curp nodded.

"Just work some whisky into him and I believe he'll be able to talk, Kilden. He's an outsider. Somebody hired him."

Kilden stood staring at the silver filigree work of his boots a long moment. Yes, Joyce would talk. And talk loud when he recognized him, Sam Kilden. And then, not even Samson Curp would be able to save him, Kilden knew full well. He had stayed too long. They'd learn he was a wanted man, a horsethief, not the famed Boots Kilden. The string was about run out.

CHAPTER IX

YUCCA JOYCE talked all right. They worked some whisky into that vicious little

knobhole of a mouth and his eyes flickered slightly. He croaked:

"Gawd in heaven, Yucca ain't going to die yet. . . No, Gawd. Not Yucca, he can't—" Then he lapsed off though he still stared at the ceiling, apparently unaware of the men around him, Curp, Deputy Hare and Kilden, plus the two black-garbed guards from the Monte Carlo.

They gave him more whisky and Curp gave his sheriff a sign. Sweat budded Kilden's forehead; he said how about looking at the gent's wound. They opened up the checkered shirt. It was worse than they had thought, far more than a hole plugged through the flesh between the ribs. There was the blood-welling spot where the slug had entered the body. But it had not emerged; instead, deflected by a rib, it had veered off inside.

Curp swore gently. "He's undoubtedly bleeding internally. And Pill-bottle Mason," he was the town's other doctor, "hasn't returned from the settlement down on the flats yet. Better get him talking, Kilden."

Kilden leaned over the man, squeezing his lower jaw to get his attention. "Rannyhan, you're in a bad way. We're the Law. Mebbe you'll be cashing your chips soon. Hear? Who hired you to do this job on Doc Pet-tus?"

Joyce hard though his eyes did not switch from the ceiling directly above. "I'm dying?" he asked.

"You're hit bad; odds're against you. Who hired you?" Kilden shook the man's head slightly. "You wanta make your peace with Gawd, don't you?"

"Yes—y-yes. I was brought in here by Sw—" And then his eyes dropped to focus on Kilden's face. The little mouth jerked. A faint hopeful grin came over his face. "S-Sam Kilden. . . Sam. . . This ain't the Law then. N-No." He sank back after the effort his surprise brought on.

More whisky failed to rouse him a third time. Phil Hare, the deputy, recorked the bottle, shaking his head. "He knew you, boss; but he got mixed

up in your name, didn't he?"

Kilden and Samson Curp crossed eyes as the latter toyed with his gold snuff box. Both were thinking the same thing. Joyce had been on the point of naming Sweedy when he recognized Kilden.

Curp spoke. "If we can keep him alive till that doctor, Mason, gets in, he might be able to pull him through. Anyway, he could get the slug out, then perhaps stimulate him with drugs so he could make a statement."

SAM KILDEN nodded as he followed the train of Samson Curp's thoughts. Kilden's hands shook slightly as he fashioned a Durham tube and fitted it into his dry lips. If Yucca Joyce lived long enough to talk, he would mention more than one man. Curp must realize that, Kilden thought. But the gambling king seemed to choose to ignore that possibility.

Curp made one of his few gestures even suggesting violence. His hand contorted around the snuff case, fingers twisting. "Then, it's the man we think it is—"

Again Kilden nodded as Curp passed.

The latter went on, "—we'll have the deadwood on him. . . We'll have the evidence that will put him against the wall. This whole town will rise up at last and run out the man who ordered the killing of Doc Pettus—run him and his whole pack of jackals out Yes!" He put on his stovepipe hat. "Pray he lives till Mason gets back."

He went out. Men swarmed in the road before the jailhouse, awaiting some report. In his calm unimpassioned voice, Samson Curp told them that the prisoner was between life and death, that there was nothing further to be done till Pillbottle Mason returned. The men began to disperse, grumbling that it was a danged shame if the polecat didn't live to be hanged. . . .

In a back room of his *Redeye Palace*, the gangling Barton Sweedy was already in action against this latest contingency. When he had planned to have the killing hung on the deni-

zens of Whisky Row, he had counted on savage bloody retaliation by the town's citizens. It would have been retaliation that would have cleaned out the Row gang and left him the big potato with his hands free to handle Kilden. Now Kilden held that damn Joyce, and if Joyce lived to talk—The very thought itself made Sweedy bat his pale eyes and catch at the mouth of his chinless face. Then he emptied the glass on the table, steadied, and gave the word to those hired hands there he trusted.

"Git out. Move around an' spread the word that the John Law is a-lying. Sabe? Spread the word that Joyce was just scratched by a slug. And that Kilden is a-lying 'cause he don't want no lynching party. Git it?"

"And we do, Bart?" one of the men asked.

Sweedy nodded. "We do. Git that mob fired up. You boys know how to spread things around. Git going. They'll tear that jailhouse down! Then even if he's half dead, they'll tote him out an' swing him. . . ." He did a little clog step.

"Sure, we can handle it, boss. Easy. We'll just keep reminding 'em of what a great gent the Doc was!"

"That's it. And tell 'em too," added Sweedy, "that the prisoner is in cahoots with the sheriff—playing possum about his wound. See?"

"We'll have 'em yelling for a hempen necktie inside of an hour, boss. . . ."

UP IN the *Lucky Lode* Jen Radall quickly got wind of what was due to take place. A necktie party after they busted in the jail. The orchestra had stopped playing because there was nobody dancing. Instead, men stood in little sober-faced knots at the bar, ignoring the girls and talking among themselves. Occasionally she would catch a, "But that Boots Kilden." And she realized that was the only thing holding them back.

Gradually they began to drift out, in twos and threes, joining with others on the wooden sidewalk for more muttering. They moved down toward the main drag. Jen had noticed the Sweedy man working

amongst them at the bar. Retiring to her own room upstairs, her agile wily mind went to work. She arrived at a cold-blooded decision shortly. The inside story of the situation was known to her. The smitten Cal Byman, the stage-line owner, had dropped a hint at her subtle prodding right after the latest shooting in Whisky Row.

Drawing on a cape she went down the rear stairs where Ben Lucian, now laid out up on Boothill, had met his fate. Gil caught her going out the back door. He held up a nervous hand.

"Better not go out, Miss Jen. Uh—they's going to be some trouble brewing and—" he started with a weak smile.

She scoured him from his pretty face to his boot toes with scornful eyes. "Have you found a bed to hide under yet?" Then she slammed the door behind her.

By the time she was in front of the impressive Grand Hotel she was forced to work her way through the spectators watching the black mass of men down in front of the jailhouse. Those men weren't milling or bellowing. They were really dangerous, standing in little groups, watchful, hands on gun butts, all facing the front of the now darkened jail. Then a leader stepped out into the wan moonlight from the shadow of a eucalyptus and raised his voice.

"Kilden," he called, "we don't want no trouble with you! But we want that prisoner, and we're aiming to git him if we have tuh—"

Sam Kilden's voice cut him off from behind one of the heavily-barred front windows, short and harsh. "Git yourselves a bellyful of lead, maybe?" he finished it for the ringleader. "Joyce is a prisoner of the Law. And I aim to hold him. Sabe?"

UP IN the *Lucky Lode* John Radall loomed. He could step the hell out of this. Samson Curp wasn't doing anything to help. No, Curp didn't dirty his hands in it when gunplay and violence were involved. But Kilden knew he wasn't going to let them have Joyce without a fight, a bitter last-ditch fight. If Doc Mason

came in in time to bring Joyce around so he could say his piece, they'd have Sweedy and*the power of his breed broken in Saddle. Somehow, for some reason, Kilden wanted that—the way a real hard-bitten honest lawman would. In the meantime, this jailhouse wasn't going to get leaky if he could help it.

They had already removed the unconscious prisoner to the safety of an upstairs cell. Back from one open window, Kilden himself stood with his six-guns ready and a hatful of fresh shells on the desk beside him. At the other window was Ruchter with a double-barrelled shotgun and his Colts on a nearby chair. Kilden didn't figure on him being much help if a rush carried them in close enough. At the backdoor was the inexperienced but loyal Hare.

"Remember Doc Pettus!" cried somebody in the road. The little knots stirred, edged forward. It was touch and go. Some men drifted behind trees to be ready to pour accurate fire through the windows when the others rushed the door. Down to the left on the other side of the road a wagon was drawn up before the blacksmith's barn. And Kilden knew there were men behind that, too. It would come soon.

"Don't make so much noise, boys! Doc Pettus' killer wants to catch some shut-eye!" a mocking voice taunted them.

"Kilden," the ringleader tried again, "you'd better—"

"Be careful there, ma'm! Stay back—stay back!" another gent yelled as the woman appeared.

Jennifer Redall calmly came walking on along the sidewalk by that end of the road, the cape wrapped around her. Moonlight touched her red hair with a silvery finger. She was recognized and others warned her back, but none tried to stop her. She turned in at the path to the jail.

"What do you want?" Kilden asked through the window.

"Let me in, please, Sheriff." After a moment, the heavy bar slid back and she entered, smiling slightly as she passed Ruchter's shotgun barrel. "I was a nurse once. Mr. Kilden. I

worked close to doctors for some years. I hear you have a wounded man here, and I thought perhaps I could help."

He looked down at her before he cut his eyes watchfully to the window again. "Better get out, ma'm. They's going to be lead flying."

She slid out of the cape. "I'm not worried about that. Where is he? I'll see what I can do."

Kilden's face swivelled toward her once again, plain admiration on the leather-hued features. She had nerve. "Upstairs. Keep him alive if you can." He listened to her steps, steady and sure, as she went down the corridor and up the stairs. Almost simultaneously he sensed the indecision outside. They didn't want to slam at the jail with a woman inside. Some of them drew back and formed in a knot to talk by the hay and feed store.

Upstairs in the open rear cell, Jen Redall paused only to listen to see if she was being followed up. Then she moved over to the cot where the wounded Joyce lay. Seeming to feel her presence, he lifted a hand from the bed as if seeking succor. She stepped back a trifle as it brushed her skirt.

"Get Sam—S-Sam," Joyce husked, vicious mouth, ashen-lipped now. "I—I'll tell him—anything—anything he w-wants to know." He tried to reach her with his hand again. When he failed, the arm dropped limply.

She stood scrutinizing him with a face like a stone mask in the moonlight slanting in a cell window. His eyelids dropped halfway and she moved closer. She wondered who Sam was. Bending, she pulled a corner of the blanket off his shoulder, lifted it, wadded it. He lifted the hand, groaning slightly, as if to stop her. She struck down his arm and it lay without rising again. He was too weak to resist when she pressed the wadded-up piece of blanket down over his mouth and nose. . .

Kilden looked over his shoulder from the window as she returned downstairs. In the dimness she made a helpless gesture with her hands.

"He died just after I got up there," she said softly.

Kilden's face darkened with the anger of frustration. "Did he talk—say anything? Did he mention a name?"

She shrugged, head bent as if in sadness. "He mumbled something. . . I couldn't understand it though—that was all."

Kilden dropped his hardware on the desk with a clatter and went over and unbarred the door. The road was hushed as he moved onto the steps. He called, "You gents want to hang a dead man, then come in and get him."

Two of them stepped out as a committee. They entered the jailhouse and went upstairs. When they clumped down, they were carrying their sombreros, looking sheepish.

"We're right sorry, Kilden," one of them muttered. "You see—well, being a stranger here, y' wouldn't understand. We was all mighty fond of Doc Pettus."

"Even in this hellhole, Doc didn't have an enemy," the other man said.

Kilden looked as if he would curse. "Sure, nobody. But *he's dead*—and somebody hired that Joyce upstairs to get him that way. Get the hell out, will you?" He was savagely bitter, realizing he had lost a big hand in this game.

BUT in front, Ruchter was busily officious now as he ordered the mob to move along. Young Phil Hare was out there too, talking with some older men about notifying Doc Pettus' daughter. The killing had been kept from the crippled girl thus far. Kilden strode over to the desk and thumped the roll top softly with a discouraged hand. He had been ready to give his life to defend that jail. If Joyce had only lived, they could have broken this Bart Sweedy.

It was strange, he realized. He and Sweedy scarcely knew each other. He had spoken to the boss of the *Redeye Palace* only a few times since coming to Saddle, barely more than a nod and a howdy. Yet they were foes; Kilden knew that. And he hated Sweedy with a cold implacable hate. He began to curse, pounding the desk top with his palm. Then he discovered he was not alone.

There was the rustle of a dress.

And in the still unlighted office he saw the girl standing over in the hallway leading to the rear. He moved over to her. Her upturned face seemed pale.

"It's terrible to see a man die," she whispered. And swayed slightly so that she had to put a hand against his chest to steady herself.

"You were brave to come here, Miss Jen." The burnished red hair was just below his face. He wanted to touch it.

Her head shook. "They wouldn't have hurt me, a woman. But you—they'd have killed you to get him, Mr. Kilden."

He shrugged, feeling himself tremble inside at the closeness of her. "It's part of the job," he said drily and felt stupid.

"If somebody only could clean up Saddle," she said with a little sigh.

"We almost did it tonight, maybe. If that killer had only lived—" He ran a hand over his always flat black hair. "And you sure tried to help, Miss Jen."

Her eyes lifted to meet his with a magnetlike quality, drawing him. She murmured, "Boots, I'll do anything I can to help."

Then he had her in his arms and was kissing her. His mouth was hard against hers, like a blow at first. Then the fire of her ran into his blood and his lips eased. For the moment, all the bitterness and pain of his life was washed away.

A little later, as he watched her walk away from the jailhouse with that strange dignity in every line of her, he put aside the idea of saddling up and disappearing. He had decided upon that after they brought in Joyce. Now, he knew he had to stay a little longer. . . .

THOUGH apparently as serene as ever when she entered the *Lucky Lode* again, Jen Redall was exultant with secret triumph. Up in her room, she got ink and paper and began to write. It was the confession of the dying Joyce that she wrote. How he had told her he had been hired by one Barton Sweedy to kill Doc Pettus, and how she had been afraid to re-

late what he told her in fear of retaliation. She put those things down. She would get that fool, Gil, to sign as a witness to her signature. He wouldn't have to know what the document contained. And in the morning, after sealing it in an envelope, she would have it put away down at the bank. They knew her there quite well now; she had an account and made many fat deposits.

Her game was going beautifully. She had taken care of that Joyce because she didn't want to see the Law get Sweedy. Not yet, anyway. That would leave Kilden in full control, in a position to run out the ragtag and cheap toughs and gunmen. And Jen Redall preferred violence and disorder in Saddle for her ends for a spell too.

Smiling, she reread the document. This was going to cost Mr. Sweedy a nice large sum of money, just the threat of it.

The smile turned to a frown as she saw the spot of dust on her dress. She brushed at it. She'd gotten that when she was in Boots Kilden's arms. She smiled slowly, coldly, again. Yes, and tonight she had added another man to her string. . . .

CHAPTER X

THE muttering was already building when Sheriff Kilden made his rounds of the town the next night. Men, apparently, had hoped for a miracle, had thought that just the threat of the guns of the famed Boots Kilden might bring peace to Saddle. But there had been disorder, more trigger slammers coming to town, and now this slaying of the doctor.

"Sure they got the killer," they argued, "but that was no fault of Kilden's. And who was behind the killer? Kilden don't seem to be doing nothing much since putting lead into Keys. Yeah. And. . ." That was where the ugly rumor, the innuendo came in. Nobody knew who started it; it came like a snake out of the grass. Perhaps, it went, Boots Kilden didn't want to stop the trouble. After all, he had been an outlaw once, an hombre who

defied the Law. Maybe he was getting paid by somebody not to clamp down.

As he circulated, looking in one place after the other, Kilden knew men were talking. They broke off too abruptly when he appeared on the their nods, their howdies. Then young Hare told him about the insinuation that had begun to get around.

Kilden's jaw muscles bunched and the thin fires licked in the backs of his black eyes. In a moment, the reaction was gone. He remembered what he was himself, a lobo, a one-time rustler, an accused horsethief. And he was going to get his chunk of dinero somewhere, somehow, out of this and then hit the trail. Let them say what they would.

But when he marched into the *Redeye Palace* and the gangling bird-faced Sweedy had the nerve to come over and talk to him. Kilden had to struggle for self control. Sweedy offered a drink, smiled when the sheriff refused bluntly, then started talking.

"Kilden, I know you done all you could, but I sure feel a heap bad about the shooting of Doc Pettus. A fine character, that old fella. Now if that dang killer had only lived—"

The danger light flickered in Sam Kilden's eyes. The wolfish look crept over his face. "Yeah, Sweedy?" he said hoarsely. "And if he had, you'd either be in that jail or dancing on air under a limb right now!"

Sweedy's jaw sagged as if he'd bitten into the rotten meat. "Now wait a minute! If you're accusing—why that's plumb crazy. I—"

"Why did you want the Doc dead, Sweedy?"

The barroom boss essayed a smile, sunken eyes steady. "He threatened my life Sabe?" Then he broke into thin jangling laughter. The hangers-on echoed him.

"Joyce was your man, Sweedy, brought in from outside. If he'd lived, we'd have had you; he was about to name you." Kilden's shoulders lifted as the gorge inside him rose. He himself had lived by the threat of the gun at times, but he had been driven to it. This cold-blooded killing, killing by a hired hand, was sickening to him.

"You wanted something big blamed on Whisky Row, Sweedy. So you—"

"Wait!" the barroom boss screeched. "Please pen them insults an' charges less'n you got proof, Kilden. I won't draw 'gainst you 'cause you're the Law! But as a decent citizen I got some rights and—"

WITH a quick motion, Kilden unhooked the badge on his shirt and shoved it in a pocket. Then he spat on the floor in disgust as he folded his arms on his chest, well away from his thonged-down weapons. "All right. Go for your hoglegs now, you oversized yella buzzard!" There was a terrible, a deadly calmness about him.

Sweedy stood puffing up, face ochre-hued. Somebody jumped away from a table, spilling a glass, to seek cover when the lead flew. The glass hit the floor, spattering loudly in the tension of the hot room. A single sweat drop hung on the end of the statuelike Sweedy's sharp nose. And again he managed a smile as he looked around as if to say, "See, this lawman is locoed."

"Kilden, don't lose your head," he said gently in his twangy voice. "Sure, I know you're under strain. It's a tough job. But—"

"Draw or shut up," Kilden said slowly.

Sweedy shook his pin-sized head. "You're plumb wrong about me hiring that gunman, Joyce. But if you don't aim to listen to sense, all right. I'll have to ask you to git the hell off my premises. Why, my Gawd, sheriff, I even," he looked around at his gun slicks at either side of him as if for confirmation, "I even sent word to the undertaker to give Doc the best coffin in the house and charge it to me. Go ask him!"

That piece of hypocrisy was too much for Kilden. He lashed out with a fist and the tall Sweedy stretched his length on the floor, hat flying. Hands leaped to gun butts. One of Sweedy's toughs jumped behind a post.

Kilden sneered. "Go ahead, two-bits! Clear leather when you're ready—but be sure you're damn sick

of living. And if that fella behind the pole so much as spits, I'll give him a winda in the skull!"

Sweedy sat up, a ribbon of blood drooling down his chin. "Don't touch gun irons, none o' you! That's the Law there!" With the aid of a chair, he drew himself to his feet unsteadily. And again the chinless-faced man smiled. "But it's a danged strange kind of Law that comes into an innocent gent's place and starts kicking him around, by grab. Yes. Still, I'm helpless."

WHEN Kilden turned his back and walked out through the men staring in the big double doorway, he knew he hadn't won anything. He had made himself and the Law look bad. By not resisting, Sweedy had gained public support. And he had a peculiar feeling that Sweedy had not done anything because he had an ace up his sleeve, because he knew of something due to happen.

"Boss!" Young Hare ducked under a hitchrail. "There's been two more rustling jobs out on the range." A rider from the Stirrup-D had just come into the jail with the news. Some of the Stirrup men, coming in from the south after having been down combing the brakes for strays, had run head-on into them as they moved off a band of critters. There had been a skirmish. Outnumbered, the cowmen had to draw off.

"But they got one of the bunch," Hare went on excitedly, talking loudly. That one had been badly wounded, knocked from his pony. He had died shortly afterward, but not before they had learned from him that the boss was Red Norman.

Something drew Kilden's head around before he started for his office. In the doorway of the Redeye Palace, within earshot, stood Bart Sweedy, hands stuck in the pockets of his shabby pants, teetering back and forth as he laughed quietly but with evident satisfaction. His face went dead-panned as Kilden's eyes hit him.

Down at the office, the Stirrup-D man, wounded arm in a sling, added a

few details between expectorations of tobacco juice into the spittoon. "It's the Red Norman outfit, all right. He was a big potato, and a tough one. down along the Rio. Even got himself elected mayor of Caballo down there once."

Kilden nodded. He knew who Norman was. "But did you pick up any trail?" he said as Samson Curp entered. The word had gone around.

"That's it," the gaunt cowhand said eagerly. "They was driving the stuff east toward the Sentinels—like they done both times afore. Hit into some of them ol' river beds."

Kilden nodded impatiently. "And it rained today so—"

The cowhand shook his head. "After we was driven off, we took one of our boys who was shot up pretty bad back to a plow chaser's place. Then we struck out again." They'd pushed eastward, then wheeled in a big arc. They had picked up the track in one of those dry river beds cutting the plains country, had followed it in to one of those tortuous canyons that snaked into the wall-like Sentinels.

"No man ner devil can swing cow critters 'cross the Sentinels," the cowhand affirmed. "'S impossible. So they're in there somewheres." But Norman's bunch were known to be wire-tough gunslingers, and there were too few Stirrup hands. They hadn't dared go into the labyrinthic fastnesses of the Sentinels after the rustlers. They were waiting at the canyon end out there now to see what help came.

CURP spoke up crisply. "Deputize a posse, Kilden. It's within your powers, and the town will foot the bill. You can put a deputy in charge and—"

Kilden was already shaking his head as he went to the rifle rack on the wall. He was remembering now Sweedy stood laughing when Hare brought the news of the rustling depredations. "I'll lead them myself. This might be a bigger thing than we think." He was wondering if it could be tied into the things happening in Saddle itself.

Gathering a posse was easy. With wages of five dollars per day, there were plenty of men in Saddle willing to ride behind the sheriff. He selected some fifteen, including a man whom he was sure was a Samson Curp house guard though the gent had shed his black garb. Leaving the two deputies in charge of the town, Kilden rode out to the north under a yellow moon that sat poised like a ball on a stubby craggy peak of the Sentinels.

They pushed across the great rolling plains of the lush grazing country, bearing eastward toward the Sentinels. In the night, the long uneven ridge looked like a ragged fence built by some drunken giant, forbidding and a little eerie. As they drew closer to it, they repeatedly struck the dried-out beds of pre-historic rivers that slashed the range. They'd come upon them suddenly, just over a swell, or perhaps hooking out from a splotch of mesquite jungle. Or they might worm from the center of a mass of brush, broad shallow beds where the one-time stream had sunk into the earth to expire. They twisted and angled snakelike as they extended eastward, deepening, the bottoms boulder-strewn, shaly, with stretches of drifting sand as they approached the mother hills. They narrowed into gulches, became rock-sided defiles in spots, before they dived into the Sentinels.

They pulled up once and quit the saddles to munch on some jerked beef and puff on a quiry late in the night. For the first time since coming to Saddle City, Sam Kilden felt relaxed, unstiffened. It was a little hazy and when he lifted his face to the stars they seemed like smudged holes burnt in a blanket. They made him feel better too. He was used to being out under the stars, sleeping under them. Sometimes with one eye open, of course.

"Won't rain before tomorrow night. Betcha two-bits," said one of the posse column behind him and Gideon, the Stirrup-D man. "Tomorra will be hot and damp, sure. But no rain till—"

KILDEN returned to his thoughts, thoughts of the open trail, of hitting it again before somebody else who knew him sloped into Saddle. Or before the trap closed on him, before he stopped that last chunk of lead an hombre never knows hit him. He felt deep inside him that a trap was being built. The lawless element didn't dare oppose a figure like the famed Boots Kilden openly, wouldn't dare to call him gun muzzle to gun muzzle. But he was equally sure they weren't going to take it lying down.

Gideon grunted and they left the fence-line they had been following. Then, just beyond a chimney butte, they dropped into one of those dried-up watercourses that scarred the face of the range. "We'll reach 'em about dawn," the cowhand said. "Less'n, of course, Norman's bunch turned back an' run 'em out."

Out. That word stuck in Sam Kilden's mind. There was still time for him to get out. Up there in those hills, he could quit the posse, turn south, and head for the Border. South of it, a man could use any handle he fancied and not too many questions would be asked. Maybe he could find work down there and forget things. Then the serene oval of Jen Redall's face rose before him. A little pulse began to drum in his temples.

Yesterday afternoon he had been unable to stand the tension of the town any longer. He had hit the saddle and gone up the side street past the *Lucky Lode* toward open country, craving to get away from men and the evil they spawned for a short spell. He had been out a few miles where the creek bowed over to the narrow trail when he saw the dust of an approaching rider behind. He waited, figuring it might be one of his deputies with a message. It was Jen Redall. She'd seemed surprised to come upon him.

They had sat on the bank of the creek over the slow-purling water and talked till the shadows lengthened. She'd told him about her life, the bitter poverty, the drunken hoe-man of a father. Of being farmed

out to work in a ranch-house. Of being forced to flee that because of the unwanted attentions of the foreman. Then there was the unfortunate marriage to a man who turned out to be a tinhorn card sharp who had deserted her when she was with child. A boy, it had died shortly after birth. And she had been on her own.

"I've had some hard times," she had told Kilden in the low voice, idly plucking grass blades. "It's been hard to keep decent and honest. But I've got a nice job here in Saddle. I mean to stay; and I mean to stand on my own feet—like—like a man."

His admiration for her had surged in him. He had felt an overwhelming desire to protect her, to shield her from the rawness of life. But he had no right to tell any woman those things, not him, a wanted man, an imposter. Then he had seen that single tear sliding down her cheek. And before he knew it, he had her in his arms again. Together they had ridden back to town through the warm dusk, stirrup to stirrup. She had asked one question before they parted.

"Boots, did you come directly here after you crossed the Border from Mexico?" she had asked.

And when he had nodded curtly, and said he had, he had sensed she knew he was lying.

Now, thinking of her, he knew he wouldn't cut for the Border yet. He wanted to see her a little longer. His head jerked up as Gideon, riding beside him in the old river bed, said something.

CHAPTER XI

THE DAWN was a gray tongue licking over the tops of the saw-toothed peaks when they rode into the camp of the four Stirrup-D men at the base of a bluff of the precipitous Sentinels. When their identity was known, the four cowhands bearing Winchesters moved out of the gloom back in toward the embers of the campfire.

They had little to tell save that after dusk last night one of them had scouted up the tunnel-like canyon, followed trail sign into a branching

defile of the labyrinthic hills. He had located the rustler camp, had seen the smoke of their campfire in the moonlight, had even caught the lowing of cattle. But he had been unable to get close because of outposts they had stationed up on the ledges.

After a two-hour rest, the posse moved into the Sentinels under an overcast sun. It was a gloomy land, bleak, savage, dismal. Heavy crags and stubby dark peaks overshadowed them. There was little vegetation; clumps of brown grass, greasewood, occasionally some yucca with its clusters of drooping lily-white blossoms. Sometimes a stunted gnarled tree growing from the fissure of a rock wall. Sporadic winds, sometimes rising to blast violence, howled the canyons and stone-walled corridors that bit into the mountains like vagrant ghosts.

They found the abandoned camp of the rustlers in a small bowl under an overhanging bluff. It was plain that cattle had been bedded down in there by the brackish water hole. They followed the trail of them, angling deep into the maze. There were long stretches of sandy floor, then reaches of hardpan. In spots where the wind had raked, all sign on the sand was erased.

THEY came to a place where a gorge split into forks and where rustlers seemed to have split the herd too. Tracks went up both forks. Kilden chose the left one, having little alternative because the posse behind him refused to split up. They didn't know how big the band they ran into might be. On the other side of a little stream, that herd seemed to have been split again. Again the sheriff flipped a coin, took the left trail when it came up tails again.

With the sun refracting from the rocks on all sides, it grew as hot as the inside of an oven there in the gorges and canyons of the Sentinels. Men's shirts turned black and became plastered to sapped bodies. The reek of horse sweat moved with them. Then they came to a cul de sac, a dead end of blank rock around a

sharp bend in that passage. Against it, penned in by a makeshift fence of brush and rawhide, stood a few cow critters.

The hot wind flapped a piece of naper attached to the rude corral. It had pencilled on it crudely, "Did yuh have a nice ride?"

Tempers flared. There was nothing to do but turn back and pick another trail. The rustlers knew they were being followed. That sobered some of the braggarts in the party. But back at the stream, the second trail soon grew faint, then ran out all together. The gusty winds in the entrails of the Sentinels had had too long a time to fling the sand about in eddies. Kilden led them on grimly, deeper into the ridge cuts, climbing at times, figuring they had to nick up fresh sign somewhere. But when they finally made night camp with a bunch of bogged-down ponies, they had picked up nothing.

"They's no way of gitting a herd through the Sentinels," one of the cowmen insisted. "No passes low enough. No trails over 'em. And grazin' an' water's too score to hold a bunch uh caw critters in here long."

"They gotta be holed up in here somewheres," agreed one of the older men from town. "It's rough deserted country up here. No man knows it stubby peaks. But they picked up accepting a proffered drink."

Many bottles made the round in the camp that night. Kilden watched with cold disgust as the redevs fired them and they boasted wildly what they'd do when they caught up with Red Norman's outfit. In the morning he had to boot most of them out of their sougans at dawn. All that day they worked around in the ragged hills, even climbing so they were at the base of some of the stubby peks. But they picked up neither hide nor hair of the rustlers. And when a cold-smearing rain began to fall, the grumbling began in earnest. They insisted on turning out of the Sentinels and back toward Saddle. Glancing back at the dour crags, Kilden couldn't shrug off the feeling that they had been under surveillance repeatedly.

THEY cut over onto the stage road that ran down through the grazing country to Saddle. It was a little after midnight when the bedraggled column came upon that rider emerging from a side-track along fence-line.

"Hear about what just happened back to the Rafter-H?" the man called to them. A masked band, obviously Norman men, had hit the place, penned the four hands of the small spread in the bunkhouse, then dragged out Old Man Hinch and larrupped him half to death with a bullwhip, had left him unconscious. "Reckon it's 'cause he reported the rustling to the sheriff. Mrs. Hinch said there was a real big bunch of 'em all right!"

Kilden asked a few questions, then turned his pony down the side track leading to the Rafter-H. But his possemen stolidly sat their ponies back on the road; they weren't following.

"No sense in wastin' good horseflesh er time," one of them explained weakly. "They'll have made tracks outa there pronto." It was a patent lie. They had heard the words "real big bunch," and they feared the bold Norman riders might just not have cleared out of the vicinity.

Kilden sleeved rain from his face and cursed them. "All right, you mangy coyotes! Drag your tails back to Saddle then!" And he sent his own cayuse at a gallop down the muddy side track.

The rain was thinning when he came to the Rafter-H, a small outfit tucked in a hollow on the lee side of a low knob of hill. The outbuildings were dark but a crack of light escaped around a curtain at a front window of the small paintless main house. When he drew up before it in the wet, he was challenged by an unseen figure from a dark window of the upper story. The outfit was on guard against a return trip of the marauders.

When Kilden identified himself by holding a cupped match before his badge, he was allowed to enter. The two gnarled cowhands in the hall kept their hands close to their gun-butts though till Mrs. Hinch came

down from above. She wasn't prostrated; she hadn't even been weeping though her eyes were red-rimmed with strain. She was a typical woman of the range, hardy, self-reliant always prepared to take care of her man when he went down.

Tall and slim with gray hair, she shook hands firmly with the sheriff and led him into the kitchen to brew up a pot of coffee. Her capable work-worn hands chunked faggots into the stove so there would be heat enough for him to get partially dried out at least. In a weary but steady voice she told how she had been wakened by the yelling of the pack out front.

"They told Noah that if he didn't come down and parley, they'd burn the place down over our heads," she related. The bunkhouse had been covered by gunmen. Her husband had gone down, been dragged out in the rain, had his shirt torn from his back, and been flogged half to death in the light of a lantern. He had recovered consciousness after being carried inside. Now, he was upstairs, out of pain in a drugged sleep from a herb tea the woman had made for him.

"His back is cut to ribbons." She lifted her apron to her eyes but quickly recovered herself.

Kilden's fisted hand twisted the calico table cloth. "And that was because he reported the rustling to the Law, to me." Fury had whitened his lips drawn back hard against his teeth. Again, instinctively, he was thinking of himself only as a lawman, pushing away his past for the moment.

Mrs. Hinch shook her head as she poured the coffee. "Oh, no, it wasn't that. They wanted money. Noah had refused them."

"What?"

"Yes, that's right. They were here yesterday. They said if Noah didn't give them money, he'd have more stuff rustled. They said if he paid them that they would protect him because the Law couldn't."

KILDEN bent over his cup of java, aware of the questioning accusing eyes of the woman on the

back of his neck, but there was nothing he could do at the moment with the rain having obliterated all tracks. He hated himself because there was nothing he could do at the time. He himself was labelled a criminal, a fugitive from the law, but fighting in this manner he could not understand. He asked one question.

"They were masked, eh, Mrs. Hinch. . . . Are you sure they were some of the Norman bunch?"

She nodded vehemently. She was very certain. In the light of the lantern held by one man while they beat her husband, she had picked out the white sombrero of a man who had come with the party demanding dinero. And another one of them had limped; so had a member of the party that had called the day before. There was no question who they were.

"We'll dig them out somehow," was all he could offer her. But he meant it as he stared into his coffee.

He spent the night there on a horse hair sofa in the little parlor of the place. There seemed no sense in riding on back to Saddle City in the drizzle. A little before dawn he was roused by one of the cowhands still standing guard. The rain had finally ceased, and the cowhand had thought he had seen a horseman silhouetted against the waning stars on a rise down the track. In his stocking feet, Kilden eased out onto the little porch and watched for some time. But there was no further sign of anybody lurking about.

The acting sheriff of Saddle was hardly up in the morning, sticking his shirt tails inside his gray trousers, when one of the men came in excitedly, waving an envelope. He had discovered it stuck in the ranchyard gate. And it was addressed to "Boots Kilden."

He ripped open the envelope, damp with the morning dew. Inside was a ragged piece of paper with a few words rudely printed on it. It said:

IF THE SHERIFF WANTS
TO LEARN SOMETHING
ABOUT RED NORMAN COME
TO THE STORE ON SMOKY
CREEK AT MIDDAY

That was all. There was no signature. Kilden's hands clamped on the paper; he wasn't deceived. This hadn't been written by any friend of the Law or by somebody who meant to double-cross the rustler leader. It was from the Norman bunch. And it proved they had been watching the posse, that they knew where he was. It was enough to scare any gent, and Sam Kilden knew it could be a trap.

But he was going to the Smoky Creek store. He had to.

CHAPTER XII

IT WAS a little after high noon when he rounded the bend of the wagon trail and sighted the store. It was a squat ugly structure with rags plugging broken panes in its front windows. A branch stage-line ran past it. Its trade came from a little valley, running off the rim of the plains country, inhabited mostly by hoemen. Cutting into a stand of yellow pine. Kilden surveyed the place. He moved deeper among the trees to get a look at the back. In the horseshed were three saddle animals.

He waited some time, loathe to walk into a gun trap. A rider came down the line from the other direction, entered the store. After a few minutes, he re-emerged and stood chatting with the storekeeper, a wizened little man with a cane and a patch over one eye. The breeze carried a smattering of words to Kilden.

"Them fellers inside. . . drinking a heap. . . cain't say as I like the cut of 'em," the storekeeper was saying.

After a little, the horseman remounted and came on down along the creek past the spot where Kilden was hidden. Loosening the blackstocked guns in his lashed-down holsters, Kilden removed his badge, and rode on openly to the place. When he climbed the rickety steps and walked in, a voice said:

"Hello, you lowdown sheepherder! Howdy. Come on in and spend some dinero. Spend some dinero."

Kilden tautened as he sought to locate it. Then he saw the green parrot in the cage swung over the counter. There was a slight tittering

sound and he saw the man seated atop a hogshead and idly whittling back in the shadows of the rear. From a door in the back, the club-footed storekeeper came hobbling in on his cane.

"Howdy, pilgrim," he called out cheerfully. "What can I do you for? We aim to please. Dang fancy prices and dang poor merchandise. Credit cheerfully given the sixth Wednesday of every month—pervided it's raining." He chuckled at his own humor as he clumped around behind the counter.

Kilden bought a sack of Durham. "Came here to meet a gent who was going to tell me about Red Norman," he said loudly.

The storekeeper just shook his head. He didn't know anything about it. "I just hope an' pray Red Norman stays clear o' here. Them bad uns, I don't want no truck with 'em. Here's your change, friend. Make yourself at home. Squat a spell. I got some chores to 'tend to out back."

Kilden had cut his eyes guardedly at the whittler when he had spoken out. The man gave no sign, indolently knifing away at the stick in his hand. He wore only one gun in sight in an open-topped holster on his hip. but Kilden noted the bulge of the shoulder holster beneath his vest. And the man's rig was too good for either a hoeman or some forty per cow nurse. Kilden went and stood in the doorway, back to the man, idly eyeing the creek.

"Real fancy pair of boots you got there, mister," said whittler.

Kilden gave no answer. A few moments passed.

"HEAR Sheriff Kilden was up this way with a posse," the whittler took it up again. "After some rustlers, they say."

Kilden nodded without turning. "He was."

"Didn't see no sign of that posse around."

"They went on back to Saddle."

"Sure about that?" The man, moving silently, was closer to Kilden now.

It took nerve, but the sheriff made no move. "I oughta be. . . You didn't see anybody coming along the trail with me, did you?" He was gambling on the fact that few men would dare to even try to take the famed Boots Kilden from behind.

"All right," said the man, sheathing his Bowie blade. "Mebbe my friend inside can tell you something about Red Norman."

They walked to the back of the store, then turned through a curtained doorway on the right that led into a musty little parlor. Two men sat at a table in the dimness, but the metal of their guns on the checkered tablecloth glistened. One of them said, "Howdy, Kilden." The other merely nodded. He sat with a black sombrero on, shadowing his face heavily, one arm propped on an elbow, the hand against the corner of his mouth with a bandanna in the fingers.

The hombre who'd brought him in pulled out a chair. Kilden hooked it with a boot still further back till it was against a cabinet, then sat down. The first man at the table, a thin long-faced gent with a reedy voice, smiled thinly. The other, big, fleshy, garbed in rusty black, just stared sullenly. He looked sluggish. Yet his tiny bright eyes that bit into a man's very flesh gave the lie to that.

The reedy-voiced one began to speak. "Reckon, sheriff, you'd like to bring in the Norman bunch, specially Red himself, eh?"

"That's my business as a John Law," Kilden said coldly.

"The Law weren't always your business, Kilden."

The latter shrugged. "Nope. But when a man gets years, sometimes he sees things in a different light."

The club-footed storekeeper came clumping into the store from the back then. Without moving the hand with the bandanna at his face, the heavy-set one in black brought out a ten-dollar goldpiece and rolled it across the table.

"Tell the old fool to find something more to do out back," he drawled in a voice that befitted his sullen demeanor.

The man who'd brought Kilden in went out. There was no more talking till they heard the storekeeper go clumping out again. Then the reedy-voiced one took it up once more.

"They's no reward out for Norman. Kilden."

"I thought you were going to tell me something I didn't know—something about Norman," Kilden snapped impatiently. "Where's his hideout?"

The thin one smiled. The other didn't stir. "Not so fast, mister. Not so fast. Information is worth dinero."

Kilden made as if to rise. "I haven't got any to pay you with."

"That's what we figured."

"What?"

"That Boots Kilden, fresh back from south of the Rio, could use some dinero. That he'd be plumb busted."

Kilden put a match to the quirly he had built while standing in the doorway. He was quivering inside as he sensed what was to come. "Yes?"

"Yes. An' mebbe he could use some dinero."

"I'm listening." This, he realized, was the opportunity he had been awaiting. To clean up and get out.

THE thin man leaned across the table, rumpling the neat cloth. "Mebbe—now mebbe if Norman felt he could operate without interference—an' mebbe if he was sure the Law wouldn't git in the way of his rustling—well, mebbe there'd be some dinero in it."

Kilden sneered. "Quit wasting my time talking two-bit stuff. Norman's gotta get that rustled stuff outa the country to sell it. How much dinero is he going to have now? How much—"

"Might surprise you," the other put in, rolling a homemade toothpick across his slice of mouth. "And mebbe Norman don't have to git the stuff out to cash in. Mebbe—"

Kilden stood up abruptly. "Sure, he's going to thrash it outa the hides of poor devils like Noah Hinch." Recalling that, he got mad and hated himself for even mentally considering going in with Norman.

The thin man made a deprecatory gesture. "A lashing's easier on a man than a bullet in his hide, ain't it? Anyways, that was just a little example to other brand owners on this range—so they won't give no trouble. Norman don't want trouble. He just aims to git dinero, and he's a big-hearted feller. He'd cut in the Law—say for two thousand dollars."

Kilden felt the blood jump in his veins but kept a poker face. Casually he flipped ashes onto the worn carpet.

The thin man leaned further over the table. "Mebbe even for two thousand five hundred."

Kilden's brain was in a whirl, racing, thinking locoed things. He could feel Jen Redall's lips against his again. Sure he was a fugitive from the Law, with a bad past. But a man could go somewhere new, change his name, and get a decent start with that kind of dinero. He could take her out of that honky tonk dancehall where she didn't belong. They could get married down the line somewheres, then—

"I'm waiting," the thin man said.

"What do I have to do for it?" Kilden asked hoarsely.

"Nothin'—just plumb nothin'. She's as easy as spitting in the crick. Easier! You just don't interfere with Norman's bunch. You just can never track 'em down or find 'em."

"I haven't—yet," Kilden, suspicious, reminded him.

The thin man shrugged. "If the cowmen on this range see that the Law can't stop Norman, they'll fall into line. Norman's willing to pay."

"When?"

The thin man cut his eyes triumphantly at the silent one in black. "Come here night after tomorra. That'll be Thursday night. Meet us here after dark. We'll have the dinero—two thousand five hundred, Kilden, I knew you'd have sense. They always said ol' Boots was slicker 'n slobbers!"

This was it, Kilden knew. His mind was like a stampeding horse as he thought of what he'd say to Jen. How he'd ask her. How they'd clear out in the night. Where they'd go.

He nodded, heard himself saying it was a deal. He took the hand the thin man stretched across the table to seal the deal.

CHAPTER XIII

"**B**UT HOW—what guarantee will Norman have that I won't cross him up?" Kilden asked, on guard again. It seemed too easy; something didn't smell right.

The heavy-set man at last took the bandanna down from the corner of his mouth. "I'll take Boots Kilden's word any time," he said, smiling at last, and when the bandanna came away it revealed the jagged wide knife scar, a strange always-angry red, angling down from the corner of his mouth. At first, it almost looked as if he were bleeding. It was from that he got his name, Red Norman.

"You play with us, Kilden, and we both can make dinero."

Kilden couldn't savvy it. "But even if the Law holds off, the cowmen'll track you down and smoke you—"

But already Red Norman was shaking his head. "Not a chance of that," he said. The two big outfits on the plains hated each other, would sooner blow to Hell than co-operate. None of the little fellows trusted either of the big outfits. So there was little to worry about.

"But how're you going to get the cow stuff outa the country?" Kilden persisted.

"Ain't," said Norman, habitually sullen but with a note of smug triumph now. "We aim to sell 'em back to the original owners—and sell 'em pertection against being rustled some more. It's a pretty little game." He explained how it was worked. When they grabbed a bunch of cows, they swung them into one of the dried-up river beds and into the fringe of the Sentinels. Of course, they couldn't be driven across the mountains. Instead, under cover of night, they swung them back across the plains.

"We drive 'em into that brush country off to the northwest. Sabe?"

Kilden still couldn't see how it

worked. "But to the other side of that is the desert. You'd have nothin' but hide and bones if you pushed a herd over the desert."

"We ain't. We just hold 'em up there in the brush where nobody'd ever expect to find 'em, and we sell 'em back to the original owners."

It was a slick scheme. And it told Sam Kilden more than Red Norman meant it to. He had heard of this Norman, knew what he was: a bullying trigger slammer never loathe to smoke his way out of a tight. He liked women and gay times but couldn't think much behind his trigger finger. Somebody, somebody else, was behind this whole scheme of Red Norman's.

He wasted no time in asking who it was. It would mean nothing to him anyway. He was going to collect, then make tracks. They had a drink, then shook hands as Kilden prepared to head on to Saddle.

"Thursday night—here," Norman grunted. "And Kilden, come alone. Bring one man if ya must. But—no tricks."

"You have the dinero," Kilden said drily. . . .

PART SWEEDY was standing in the doorway of his place when Sheriff Sam Kilden rode back into Saddle that night a couple of hours after sundown. Sweedy had talked to the posse when they had come in earlier that day, so he figured everything had worked out according to his plan. Red Norman would have talked to Kilden. Soon one of Norman's riders would slip in to give him the word that the stage was set. But Sweedy was not jubilant at the moment; a new element had entered this game for power in Saddle City.

She was Jen Redall, he had discovered. He still rankled from that private session he had had with her. It was still hard to believe that such a demure-faced girl was, beneath the surface, as wolfish and hard-bitten as any man he had ever bucked. And her price had been high; he cursed at the thought of it.

But there was that letter in the bank she held over him. It might

not have been hanging evidence in a court. But coupled with what that damn sheriff already suspected, half knew—well, he couldn't chance it. He had given her a chunk of a thousand dollars. And each week there was to be further payment. Sweedy's deepest eyes burned.

Yes, continued payments—until the day he had settled Kilden's fate. Then he would turn and handle that hussy. And Kilden's time would come soon, very soon. He watched the back of the John Law as he rode up the line.

At the jailhouse, Kilden got a surprise. Both Ruchter and Phil Hare told him there had been no trouble, save for a few personal barroom scraps, in Saddle since he'd left. It should have been a pleasant surprise, but Kilden was no fool. He read between the lines. The magic of the name, Boots Kilden, had driven the small fry to cover, caused the cheap gun toughs and tinhorns to behave or hunt cover elsewhere. But the big ones, who wanted trouble, led by Sweedy, had stirred up nothing in his absence because then, as the Law, he could hardly be blamed for it.

When he turned in after patrolling the town that night, he speculated on that some more. Sweedy, he knew, was the big ace on the other side of the game, but he couldn't prove it. And meanwhile, he was getting no closer to hanging the deadwood on Sweedy. That was the danger of this game. Time was on Sweedy's side. He could make his undercover moves and—

Then Kilden remembered. Soon he would no longer be a lawman, no longer be responsible for what happened in Saddle. He was quitting.

In the morning he had breakfast with Ruchter at Chino Joe's restaurant across the street from the hotel. The veteran deputy for once volunteered some information.

He said he'd noticed a gent hanging around up in Whisky Row, a newcomer to Saddle. Only he wasn't a stranger to Ruchter. "I figger it's Sleeper Keys' brother, Kilden. Al Keys, his handle was. Years back he was here in business with Sleeper.

Then he went away. He's got a black beard now. But I'm danged sure it's A.I."

"Yeah." Kilden stirred his coffee imperturbably.

"Better keep an eye peeled, boss. Them Keys got bad blood on 'em. They don't like to have no score unsettled or—"

ONE of Samson Curp's black-garbed housemen came in. He told Kilden Mr. Curp would like to see him as soon as possible. Kilden realized it was as good as a command. After another gulp of java, he hitched up his gunbelt and went down to the Monte Carlo. He was taken upstairs to Curp's luxurious living quarters.

The little gambling king was having his breakfast up there. He greeted Kilden friendlyly and invited him to sit down and have some fresh java. "Tell them to send up some of that special whisky of mine too, Joe. One shot won't hurt us even this early." He smiled, then took a pinch of snuff. After a heavy sneeze, he went on, "Too bad that rustler hunt was a wild goose chase, Kilden."

Kilden nodded through the smoke of his quirly. "They just seemed to have vanished into thin air back in the Sentnells." He felt uneasy.

Rising, the gambler walked over to one of the bedraped front windows and gazed down into the main street. Beside him stood the painter's easel that Kilden had noticed before. But a picture stood on it now, an oil. And, in a vague way, he realized it was a freshly painted picture.

"Say, are you a painter too, Curp?"

"Oh, I daub away at it sometimes. Everyone to his secret sin. . . If you could even have brought in one of the rustler bunch, it would help to silence this loose talk in the town, Kilden. I know you did your best, of course."

Kilden had risen, drawn toward the painting for some reason. Curp still stared out the window. The painting was a range scene, a little building standing by a creek. Another stride and Kilden recognized the building. It was the store out on Smoky Creek, the store where he had met Red Norman and made the deal.

Curp glanced over his shoulder. "It's not my best, by far. Some day I must show you some others."

"It's right good. I even recognized the place. I've—I've seen it." It was out before the astonished Kilden could stop himself.

"I've got a cabin on a quarter-section claim up in Smoky Valley," Curp explained. "Sometimes I go out there in the buckboard and then paist the country as I see it."

Kilden was staring more closely at the picture. The details of the store were remarkably clear. There was the horseshed behind it. And in the shed, *the painting showed three ponies.* Kilden felt the blood rush to his head, and going up the front steps of the place was a single man, a man who might have been him. He swallowed hard.

There was a final clincher. The tree out by the creek bank threw no shadow. Which meant that it was high noon.

There was no sound save for the tap-tapping of Samson Curp's finger-nail against the lid of his gold snuff box.

Finally Kilden strode back to the table and crushed out his cigaret in a saucer. He got the tacit warning. Samson Curp, who always seemed to know and hear and see everything, had been out there along Smoky Creek. It was a good bet he had seen Norman and his two men arrive. And he had seen him, Kilden, enter the place too. This was Curp's way of telling him.

Sam Kilden knew now he could never go through with the deal. Actually, there was still nothing to stop him. But from the first, Samson Curp had trusted him. He couldn't betray him and the Law with the little gambler knowing it. The deal with Red Norman was off. . .

CHAPTER XIV

CURP poured whiskey from the squat square bottle and they had a drink, then he beckoned Kilden to follow him. He had something to show him. The outlaw-sheriff felt better when they got out of the room where the portrait of the Smoky Creek store was. Curp led the

way down the hall and opened the door of a back bedroom.

A man, snoring heavily, was asleep in the cot in there. He was a tall hombre, his bare feet sticking out from the lower end of the bed. And handsome in an almost effeminate way in the bargain. He had delicately chiseled features with an aquiline nose and a long silver of blond mustache over his curved lips. His hair was a fierce bright yellow, falling back from a high narrow forehead. His rig, slung over a chair, was that of a dude, fancy and flashy including a blue silk shirt and a pearl-gray sombrero with concha-spangled hatband.

"Know him?" asked Curp, not troubling to keep his voice down. He added that the man had so much red-eye in him, a clap of thunder would not rouse him.

"No, never saw him before," Sam Kilden answered.

"It's Pretty Jim Flowers, and he knows you mighty well. You see," Curp explained, rubbing his long drooping-tipped nose, "he rode with the Boots Kilden bunch for years. As a gunman, he was Boots' right bower."

Kilden started, then shrugged. "Looks as if I pick up my pin and move out of Saddle then."

"Not at all," Curp said as he closed the door. They went back to the front room.

Kilden asked what this Pretty Jim Flowers was doing in the Monte Carlo and Curp explained. Flowers had hit town, boasting that he had come in to see his old saddle pard, Boots, and get a job under him as deputy. Curp's house guards had heard about it and brought him into the Monte Carlo and filled him up with plenty of free liquor to keep him under surveillance. When he finally passed out, they had put him to bed.

Curp paused to take a pinch of snuff. Again Kilden had cause to appreciate what a slick organization this little gambler had, how he knew everything that was happening.

"I still think I'd better clear out. He knew the real Boots well and—" Kilden started.

Curp shook his head curtly. "No. Make him a deputy. You can use a good one. Pretty Jim can throw a gun as slick as any man who ever came out of the Panhandle."

"But he'll find out I'm not Boots. All he has to do is talk a little and ask a few questions. Then—"

"Please," snapped Curp. Then his voice became mild again. "It is very simple. When you received that bullet over the side of the head," he pointed to the scar at Kilden's temple, "that almost killed you, it affected your memory. Things in your past aren't very clear to you any more. You don't like to discuss them."

"But—yes, I might bluff that. But—my looks."

Curp said, smiling, "Don't worry about that. Remember, I've seen the late Boots Kilden. You resemble him enough to be his brother or his son. And don't forget that Boots was remarkable for the way he never showed his age."

"I don't know," Sam Kilden wavered. He was only vaguely conscious of the subtle peculiar change that came over the gambling boss' face. It was a danger sign. Curp wasn't accustomed to have his ace change spots on him.

"I think you'd better," Curp said in the same casual voice with which he would give an order to one of his housemen. "I'd hate to have to unmask you, Sam Kilden. But—"

Kilden didn't even hear the threat. He had walked over to the open window. In the street below, there was a heap of shouting and cursing as a freighter, turning his heavy wagon, was almost run down by a pair of galloping horsemen. Instinct told him to get clear. He wasn't going to make that deal with Red Norman anyway. The odds were stacked too heavily against him in this imposter's game he was playing.

Then he thought of the red-haired woman, Jen. He turned on a heel, smiling crookedly. "All right, Curp. I'll take the chance."

"It won't really be a gamble," the gambling hall king assured him. "Percentage runs all in your favor."

IT WAS a couple of hours later that Samson Curp brought Pretty Jim Flowers down to the sheriff's office. On his feet, dressed, Flowers was an even more striking man. He stood two inches over six feet with the willowy narrow-hipped body of a matador. His eyes were large and dark and luminous with a soft oily light that had women turning on the sidewalk to stare after him. His teeth flashed as brightly as an unsheathed knife when he smiled which was often. He looked as if he found life amusing, as if he were accustomed to getting what he wanted from it.

"Well, you claim you knew Boots Kilden?" Curp said, feigning suspicion as they entered the sheriff's office.

Sam Kilden stood beside the roll-top desk, one of his hands not six inches from a Colts that lay out of sight. His first reaction was that it seemed impossible this fair-haired, silk-shirred dude could be a top-band trigger slammer. His own eyes were guarded and he was watching Flowers like a hawk for the first telltale move.

The latter's tall slim body remained poised in the doorway for several moments. The lumious eyes blinked. Flowers' put a gauntleted hand indecisively to his mouth. Then he was coming across the office, long arm outstretched.

"Boots Kilden, by grab! Boots—from outa the grave," he cried enthusiastically in a musical voice. "Holy Jehosaphat, Boots, danged if you don't look younger than ever! Danged if you ain't plumb like a mirage!"

Then he was flinging his arms around Sam Kilden, beating him on the back, swearing with delight.

"Howdy, Jim! Sure right glad to see you again," Sam Kilden returned the greeting, trying to put some fire into it.

"I might've known they couldn't kill you, Boots!" He stepped back to study Sam Kilden. "Was drunk for two weeks after I got the news you was dead. Seems like you're thinner, Boots. And, by damn, if anything, you look younger, a heap younger." Pretty Jim Flowers looked puzzled a

moment. "Never seen a man like you fer keeping young, Boots."

"You're looking right slick yourself, Jim. Been keeping outa jail, I hope." Kilden forced a grin. "But chasing the fillies like always, I reckon."

"Danged nigh got hitched over to Tres Pinons but the preacher man took sick and I got sense afore he got well and hit the saddle. Say, you remember the time that dancehall girl in Hondo pulled a gun on me to make me promise to marry her? That was the night afore you duelled it out with Chuck Younger and—"

KILDEN figured it was better to get it settled before he was asked a direct significant question. He touched his temple with a vague gesture. "Can't remember things so good any more—since getting hit by that stray slug down there in Mexico. Can't even seem to remember the names of some of the boys who rode with me. Their faces, yes, I can recall them. But—well, it's like there was a cloud between me and the past."

Pretty Jim Flowers looked sympathetic as he adjusted the silk neckerchief held in place by a hammered silver ring. "Oh, I see. Well, by damn, just so long's you're alive, Boots! And speaking of that, we always strung pretty close together. Could you use another deputy?" He flicked a side look at Curp. "I always play it however Boots is dealing 'em."

"Don't see any reason why Kilden shouldn't take you on," Curp said. "More trouble is in the offing. And a good man. . ."

Kilden swore in this man who was supposed to have been his first lieutenant in some bygone day he had never know. Tall Pretty Jim stepped over to a cracked wall mirror to admire the badge pinned to his white calfskin vest. Then he pushed his hat back onto his shoulders, produced a comb, and carefully raked his yellow locks into place. Kilden's lip curled in scorn. A dude like that wouldn't be worth a dang in a gun ruckus; you couldn't tell him otherwise.

When Curp had gone, Pretty Jim looked down the corridor to the rear, made certain nobody was around,

then asked Sam Kilden, "All right, Boots. How're we playing this?"

"What do you mean?" stalled the sheriff.

Pretty Jim winked. "I'm always with you, no matter which side you're on, Boots. Are you really rodding the Law here—or—"

"Playing it straight from the shoulder, Jim. . . So far, anyways."

Jim Flowers looked slightly disappointed but nodded. "However you say she goes, Boots. . . Say, do you ever hear from that young un of yours?"

That was a complete surprise to Sam Kilden. He had never heard of Boots Kilden having any offspring. He shook his head and said no. "Nary a word."

Pretty Jim patted him on the back. "That's a dang shame, Boots. You sure was crazy about that boy. Around the campfire at night you'd always tell how you was going to send him East to college and make a smart un out of him." He cocked an eye out the open door as a pretty young filly in matching pink calico dress and sun bonnet passed.

"Same old Jim," Kilden said, trying a shot in the dark. He got a chuckle and a wink in return. Young Phil Hare came in then and Kilden introduced the two.

He encountered Hare again that afternoon when he dropped into the *Lucky Lode* to ask Jen to take a ride with him. The place was almost deserted. Weak-faced Gil Lucian rose unsteadily from a table where he had a bottle. He grinned slyly when the sheriff asked for the girl.

"Go right on back, Mr. Kilden. Sure, it's all right," Gil said in a stage-like whisper. "The first room to the right in the hall there. She—she's just writing a letter."

KILDEN went back, knocked, shoved open the door when he was told to come in. He walked in to find Jen Redall and young Hare conversing at a table in the private room. The deputy went as rosy as a sunset after a hot afternoon, but Jen met him with a cool smile.

"Good afternoon, Boots. I called in

Mr. Hare to tell him about something I overheard last night at the bar." She related a tale of a conversation between two men, strangers to her. One of them, according to her, said he had been offered a thousand dollars to kill Kilden. And he had boasted he would collect the thousand. "He said it wouldn't be the first money he had earned that way, Boots. You've got to be careful."

Kilden laughed easily but his eyes darkened with emotion. Her being worried over him touched him. "Don't worry, Miss Jen. They's always a heap of flap-jaws like that around. They can talk a bird off a bush—if you listen. It's the silent ones a man's got to fear."

Young Hare shuffled out, saying he had some business to attend to. Jen agreed to go riding with Kilden. They would meet in half an hour. He left the building by a side door and cut down an alley to the main drag. As he moved away, he caught jeering laughter from the *Lucky Lode*.

It came from a couple of the dance-hall hussies watching from the balcony. For Jen Redall, coming out front, knowing who had sent Kilden back to see her without warning, had thrown Gil Lucian's glass of whisky in his face. . . .

THEY sat on the creek bank up beyond Saddle at the same spot as before, Jen Redall and Sam Kilden, talking in low intimate tones. Riding out, the sheriff had mentally cursed Curp and his all-seeing eyes and that tell-tale portrait of the store on Smoky Creek. If it hadn't been for that, he would have gone ahead on the Norman deal, then taken this soft-spoken red-headed girl out of the sordidness of Saddle City. Or Hell's Last Stand, as Curp had branded the place.

Emotion and indecision wrestled inside him as he watched her plait long blades of grass into a band with long supple fingers. His voice was slightly hoarse when he spoke.

"Takes an hombre a long time these days to get a little stack of dinero together."

"Are you in need of money, Boots?" she asked.

"Oh, no, no! Got plenty for myself." He could have had a real chunk too—that five thousand Curp had promised him—if he could have stayed on and cleaned up Saddle. But some hunch, intuition told him, he would be hitting the leather and putting Saddle behind him forever soon. He couldn't go on fooling Pretty Jim Flowers forever, and somebody else would come in. "But—well, a man thinks of other things. Of—of settling down and getting hitched—and things."

SHE patted her mouth with the plaited grass against a little yawn. She said that it was growing cool. The blood slammed in his temples as she stretched one leg on the bank so that her riding skirt fell away from the calf.

"And you shouldn't be working in the *Lucky Lode*, Jen," he went on, feeling his way. "No place like that is fitten for a decent girl. You should have your own home and—" He felt the flush climbing his neck.

"I like it there," she said, meeting his eyes without any warmth. "And I hope you aren't implying anything about my character just—well, just because I can earn my own living."

He felt miserable. She idly scaled a pebble downstream past the heavy clump of willows at the elbow. The fringes of their drooping boughs formed a thick curtain through which it was impossible to see.

"It seems to me, Boots, that a man in your position should be able to—to—" She paused, fingering an eyelid as if something were in her eye. She had been about to say to line his own pockets. "To—well, a man in your position should have opportunities to get ahead," she finished.

But he failed to rise to the bait, staring moodily at his fancy boots. Her mouth hardened. With the man infatuated with her, she had hoped to lead him along, to finally use him as her tool as she used other men.

She hinted subtly once more, "I've heard of law officers who retired in very comfortable circumstances."

He threw her a crooked smile. "A crooked badge packer is the lowest thing Gawd Almighty ever made, Jen."

She felt like cutting him with her quirt then.

When they rose to remount, he put out his arms hesitantly. She had meant to be distant. But almost without her own volition, she moved to him. Sam Kilden's senses reeled and his wire-tough body trembled. Never before had she kissed him like that. Never before had any woman kissed him like that. He had to fight to get his voice up out of his taut throat.

"Jen, I love you, I love you!" he cried.

Her hands clawed into the back of his shoulders as he lifted her off her feet and pressed his face to her again. One arm coiled about his neck and pulled his head down greedily. A single star blinked into sight overhead.

Then she was forcing him away, angry-eyed, white-cheeked, looking at him as if she hated him. What he didn't understand was that it was herself she hated for letting herself go, for admitting she could feel that way, even for a moment, about any man. . .

CHAPTER XV

THE next day he sloped out of Saddle to keep his engagement with Red Norman up on Smoky Creek. The deal was off; he was still sticking to that decision. Samson Curp knew too much, and there was an added factor behind his resolution now. Even though he would probably be forced to quit Saddle without her, Sam Kilden didn't want Jen Redall to think he was a double-crossing sneak, a traitor.

Hoofbeats came up the trail behind him. When he pulled up, Pretty Jim Flowers appeared around the bend of a cut-bank. Kilden's temper flared and he charged the good-looking gunslinger with spying on him. Flowers looked hurt.

"Shucks, Boots, back in the old days, even when you left the bunch behind, I always sided you wherever you went!"

Sam Kilden swore. "I don't give a hoot 'bout them old days. I got personal business to tend to. As my deputy, I order you—"

"Wait, Boots." Flowers' eyes narrowed. "I don't savvy. But danged if I can let you go out alone—and mebbe smekken into sure death!"

Kilden sensed something wrong. "What do you mean?"

Flowers looked puzzled. "Why, for sure, Boots, you can't have forgotten that. Ever since that ruckus in Galt Center when that marshal bent a gun barrel over your skull your eyes got a trick of sometimes fading out on ya without warning. When them times come, you can't see much more 'n arm's length." He frowned slightly as he watched Sam Kilden build a cigaret to cover his own surprise.

"I don't aim to have you caught alone when one o' them spells hits you, Boots," Flowers finished slowly.

"All right." Sam Kilden shrugged and turned his cayuse on up the road away from Saddle. He couldn't put up much of an argument against that.

It was on the verge of dusk when they hit Smoky Creek. But Kilden did not swing directly toward the shanty-like store. Instead he quartered over to the southwest to a wooden hill. From there he studied the layout. Many men would have called him a fool to trouble to return and tell Norman the deal was off. But he felt compelled to give even an outlaw-rustler a square shake. After all, he was a lobo, a fugitive from the Law, himself.

Things looked all right along the creek as a lopsided moon crept up over the ragged summit of the Sentinels. A low-turned light showed from a window of the kitchen of the living quarters. Once, on the stillness, there was the clatter of a bucket. It was the storekeeper down at the creek getting himself some water. A while after night came, they rode in closer. In a stand of trees, Kilden left Jim Flowers.

"Wait here for me, Jim. I'll be back soon."

AS HE rode on in, in patches of moonlight, he saw a number of

horsemen had been around. There were telltale signs, but he kept on. This time though, he approached from the rear of the place, dropping off his horse in the scrub before he got to the shed. He moved in a half circle around the place. It was very still, without a sign of life. A night bird called down creek. Kilden glided, crouched low, over against the little porch. When he went up the steps, the interior was blue-gray with moonlight.

He thrust open the unlocked door and jumped to one side quickly, a cocked Colts ready. "Show yourself, in there! You know who I am!" he called half-angrily. It was nerve-wracking.

Long moments, broken only by the lapping of the water on the bank. . . . A floor plank creaked inside. . . . Then a figure advanced from behind the counter in the blue-gray light. It was the whittler. He neared the door with his hands in plain sight on his hips.

"All right, Kilden. Come on in."

Sam Kilden entered. It was still dangerous but he gambled on the fact few men, under any conditions, would chance gun-play with the redoubtable Boots Kilden. The whittler led the way to the rear and pointed to the curtained doorway. When Kilden armed aside the curtain, Norman and his thin lieutenant were sitting at the table as before. There was a low-turned lamp that seemed on the verge of losing its battle with the shadows. And the windows were tightly blanketed. By one of Red Norman's hands was a neat stack of bills. Avarice licked in the tortured Kilden's eyes. Twenty five hundred would be there.

Fool, fool, he called himself. The hell with Samson Curp. Curp had hired him like an animal, bought his life. If Curp himself were busted, he wouldn't miss a chance like this. It wasn't as if he were stealing from Curp. He could accept the dinero, then bust the breeze south. The hell with everybody. Take the dinero while you're still alive.

Then he found himself shaking his head slowly. Norman beetled his

brows at him. The rustler boss had said howdy and put his hairy hand on the money to pass it over.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You loocoed or something?" asked his thin lieutenant.

"The deal's off, Norman," Kilden heard himself saying. He didn't know why he said it. Except that, somehow, he just couldn't play it any other way.

Red Norman sneered so the crimson scar at his mouth end writhed evilly. "You mean you want more? You're upping your price?"

"No, Norman. There just isn't any price. I'm not stringing with you. That's all. I'm still rodding the Law—straight," Kilden said.

The thin man leaped up, cursing furiously. He started to call Kilden names. Shoving back his black Stetson, Red Norman held up a hand to still him without removing his eyes from the John Law. Norman asked:

"Why did you show up here then? If this is some double-crossing trap, by Gawd—"

Again Kilden shook his head. "No trap. I'm alone—cept for one man back in the woods." He knew that, under cover of the table, Red Norman had started a hand for the .45 stuck inside his waistband.

"Why did you come then, Kilden?"

"I came to shoot square. . . .To warn you the Law isn't going to be bought—that it's a-going to be against you, Norman."

RED NORMAN sucked in his breath slowly. He rose. The thin man started to rant again but a stabbing glance from the boss' eyes silenced him. Kilden knew it was touch and go, that he was standing with one foot in the grave. It seemed locoed now to have come. And yet, because he had been a lobo himself, he had had to give this man a fair deal. From behind him, where the third man was, he heard a slithering sound. It could be a gun barrel sliding from its scabbard. Inwardly Kilden prayed and got ready for a double-gun draw himself. He felt Norman's eyes boring into his body.

Then the rustler spoke. "By Gawd,

Kilden, I always knew you played it straight! But I think you're a danged idiot for not coming in with us." He put out his hand. Actually, Red Norman was somewhat baffled. Sweedy had planned the whole thing, even to the rustling angle. Norman knew that Sweedy had planned to grab Kilden with the bribe dinero on him and thus break him, drive him from office.

As the two gripped hands, Norman was glad Kilden was not going to be tricked and busted. He liked the man.

Kilden asked to be let out the back door. There was no argument. He stepped into the backyard, walking quickly out past the horse shed. He had a feeling of great relief.

"Hey, sheriff," a low voice called. A man stepped around the corner of the shed, hands empty, and approached. In the moonlight, Kilden recognized middle-aged Cal Byman from town, the well-to-do owner of the stageline. Kilden was surprised but not alarmed, never guessing Byman was the decoy.

"Listen, Kilden," the scared Byman said in an unsteady voice. He feared for his own life and he hated the role, but Bart Sweedy had forced him to go through with it. "Listen. . . .Er—there's something—uh—wrong. I was coming up the trail and a—a—a man slipped into the trees down there. He was wounded and uh—uh—" His orders were to keep talking, to keep Kilden's attention engaged. Desperately Byman groped for words. "The blood—yes, the blood—it was running down the side of his head and—and—"

Something, trail instinct perhaps, made Kilden turn his head slightly. And he saw, from the corner of an eye, the two masked men with drawn guns cat-footing it up behind him. He grabbed for his third weapon, an extra Colts he had shoved inside his shirt before coming out there, and spun.

There was no need to worry about Byman. He had turned and was diving for the brush. A shot flamed, but the wheeling Kilden had already dropped to his knees.

"Surrender, Kilden! And don't try to throw away the dinero!" bawled a voice from off to his left. And from the other side of the clearing, a gun muzzle flowered vicious red and the slug droned by Kilden's hat.

The two who'd come up from behind were triggering fast. Yet no lead hit the John Law. In a split second, he realized they were trying to get him in the arms but didn't want to hit him fatally. And his own weapon smashed into action as he fanned the trigger with his free hand.

One of the pair jack-knifed over in his tracks as if he had run into an invisible barrier at waist height. The other sidled swiftly, then flung for the cover of a low rock as his gun was shot out of his hand. Dropping his now empty weapon, Kilden whipped out the pair from his holsters and wheeled to run like mad. He half stumbled over Cal Byman's body. One of those gunman's slugs, that had missed Kilden himself, had slammed Byman squarely between the shoulder blades. Never again would he greet one of the Concord coaches of his stage-line as it rolled into Saddle.

And then a chunk of lead caught Kilden in the leg, knocking him down. Fire was erupting from all sides. He rolled as he landed, gripping his shooting irons hard. As he came up, he saw Red Norman at the back door of the store. And lead was ripping into the moon-painted doorway about him. Kilden knew then it wasn't the Norman bunch that had jumped him.

CHAPTER XVI

FROM behind a tree, gaunt gangling Bart Sweedy watched the one-sided gun battle as his masked trigger slammers closed in. He had a pack of them out there, ringing in the store. Some of them were already up on the front porch. He saw Red Norman duck back in the doorway as a slug drilled his coat sleeve.

Norman wasn't in on this move. That was why Sweedy had his men masked with their neckerchiefs.

Sweedy's plan was to capture the sheriff with the bribe dinero on him and to grab off the rustler boss too. Whisk them into Saddle. Cal Byman had originally been slated to play the role of leader. And then Red Norman would be informed his only hope of getting off would be to turn evidence against Boots Kilden. The money on Kilden would clinch it.

"Go after the damn pelican!" Sweedy bellowed once in the welter of gun reports. "Go git—" Then he caught himself lest his voice be recognized. He swore as he saw the battling Kilden duck behind a clump of brush.

Kilden hobbled clumsily on his wounded leg. Every step was renewed agony. He reeled drunkenly in a zigzag course. Perhaps it was that that saved him from being cut down again. That and the fact that Sweedy had given strict orders he didn't want him dead. A dead Boots Kilden would be a hero and martyr. Nobody then would believe he had been crooked.

A figure rose out of the dimness to block the wounded lawman. One of his big guns bucked in his hand. The other went spinning back into the scrub with lead in his shoulder. Kilden flung himself off at a tangent and out of the edge of the clearing.

"That fancy dude of a Flowers won't show up, of course," he told himself as he crouched low, seeking an avenue of escape. "Not that one!"

The shooting had fallen off somewhat except back at the store where they were seeking to smoke out Red Norman. No lead stormed about Sam Kilden for the moment, but he knew they were closing in, tracking him down. A few yards away a half-seen man passed, cocked guns pushing before him. Kilden turned to his right, away from him, and tried to slip silently through the high grass. There was a shout.

"Here he is!" An hombre came up behind a boulder ahead of Kilden, triggering.

Kilden flung lead at the crimson splashes of the other's gun, got the man. The latter sank, crying out in pain, but a ricocheting slug ripped

open Kilden's scalp on the right side. It sent him staggering dizzily even as he was dimly aware of yet another gent coming up behind the fallen one. Kilden's left weapon clicked empty. He fired blindly, wildly with his other. It looked like the end.

He saw the second man rushing at him, holding his fire as he lifted his gun barrel for a blow. Then that second gent seemed to leave the ground, head jerking backward. He came falling by the half-blinded sheriff. A masked gun slick closing in from the left seemed to trip as he passed through a beam of moonlight slanting out of a gap in the foliage. Some ten yards ahead of the lawman two guns were blazing and stabbing powder flashes into the night savagely. Behind Kilden, another of Sweedy's pack was knocked flat.

"Boots, Boots, where the blazes are you?" It was the Pretty Jim Flowers, calling as he pressed in. He had already pierced the ring of gunfighters Sweedy had flung about the place.

SAM KILDEN saw Flowers' yellow hair. He called back some answer. Then the handsome outlaw-gunman was beside him, helping him along with an arm under his shoulders, twisting to slam lead to the rear. Flowers cursed an unbroken blue streak under his breath.

"Think you can make it, Boots? The damn filthy snakes, the dirty lowdown—" His gun report interrupted him as he spotted a sombrero brim around the edge of a cottonwood trunk.

They got to Kilden's ground-anchored pony and Flowers half lifted him into the kak. With the tall handsome man running alongside, they got out of there. There was no pursuit. Too many of Sweedy's pack had tasted lead already, and they had not expected anybody to come to Kilden's aid. The latter and Flowers reached the knoll where Flowers' mounted his claybank mare. Kilden swayed precariously in the saddle as they threw the spur steel to the animals and headed down toward Saddle. Inside of half a mile, Pretty Jim had

to reach over to steady his boss in the saddle.

Back at the Smoky Creek store, a wounded raging Red Norman and the one living member of his bunch with him were making a stand inside. A bullet cut down the second man and Norman was left alone. Back into the parlor, he reloaded swiftly, put an extra gun on the chair beside him, and waited for death.

It didn't come. Sweedy pulled his men out. They hit the saddles of their ponies held downstream and busted the breeze, dour frustrated Bart Sweedy at their head. There was no sense in going any further, in grabbing Red Norman and turning him into jail now that that damned Boots Kilden had somehow slipped away. When they drew up to water their ponies, Sweedy pulled out a flask of whisky and drained it, smashed the empty container on a rock. Now more than ever he was determined to get Kilden. Now more than ever before he realized he had to. Because what he had attempted to do this night would leak out sometime.

"That Kilden must bear a charmed life for sure, Bart," one of his top gunhands muttered in the saddle beside him. "I still think, though, we should uh finished off Norman."

Sweedy nodded thoughtfully. "Uh-huh. Mebbe. He'll be raving mad all right. He'll think—" Then he broke off as the germ of a new scheme began to hatch in his power-twisted brain. Norman could be made to think, if he already didn't, that the attack was a double-cross by Kilden. . . .

Silence settled over the battle-ripped store. Up in the loft over the back room, the storekeeper began to bleat and moan. Red Norman told him to shut up and limped to the back door. He had been hit in the foot and over the ribs. What had made the masked bunch pull out was a mystery to him. He studied the clearing, then went to the front and looked up and down the trail. The night was peaceful. The creek water slapped with a musical cadence at the bank.

Norman's mouth twisted so that the

red scar at one end worked like a live thing. Silent, not even resorting to epithet. He simply stared in the direction of Saddle City, piggish eyes bulging from his head.

"All right, Boots Kilden. . . I was fool enough to believe you once. Yes-s. . . Once." The rustling business was finished for the time being. To hell with Bart Sweedy and his plans. "I've got just one job now. And that's to pay you back—settle the score—Kilden. . . even if I have to die doing it. You'll be hearing from me, Kilden. . . ."

FOR three days, after Pretty Jim Flowers brought him back into Saddle half unconscious from loss of blood, Sam Kilden was laid up in bed. He was very weak and the sawbones had had to go deep to get that slug out of the calf of his right leg. One thing about that ride back kept recurring to him. It was where they came to the spot where the trail branched off to wander into the wild brushland south of Saddle. "To Monte" said the sign on the weathered post. Monte was a little squalid settlement in the brushland. And a day and a half's ride beyond was the Border.

If he hadn't been shot up that night. Sam Kilden knew he would have taken the south branch of the trail. It was time for him to get out of Saddle City, he knew. When Samson Curp came to see him the afternoon of the first day, after he had just awakened, Kilden wished he had headed for Monte. He was purposefully vague, telling Curp he had received a tip Red Norman was going to be at Smoky Creek, had tried to slip up on the store, and had been ambushed. Though Curp said little, it was plain the gambling king was suspicious.

But when the red-haired Jen Redall with the entrancing lips came to visit him, bringing some fresh-cooked food, he was sitting up in bed. Jim Flowers ran an appreciative eye over her, then left the room when he saw the fervid half-hypnotized look on Kilden's face as he watched her. The door closed and the lawman swung an arm about her slim waist. Pulled her to his chest. She came willingly

enough. Afterward, she stood smiling softly down at him as she rearranged her hair.

Then her mood seemed to change suddenly. Grabbing up her cloak, she went out the door without another word. Kilden was dumfounded. After a spell, Pretty Jim eased in and lounged on the arm of a chair. Puffing on a tailor-made cigaret, he stared out the window at nothing.

"Boots," he began slowly, "in all the time I knew you, there was only one woman you ever lost your head over. That was your wife, the woman who bore your son. . . . When she died, you said there'd never be another."

Sam Kilden stirred uneasily in the bed. There were moments when Pretty Jim could make him feel like a lowdown polecat for this bogus role he was playing. "Smells like rain tonight, Jim."

Flowers blew a perfect quivering smoke ring. "You said," he went on softly, "that you could trust one in a thousand women. That you'd had one you could trust. And that you were never going to take a chance on another. You used to say, 'Love 'em and ride away to love another some other day.' Remember?"

Kilden scratched a match on the wall for his own quirk. "I told you once, Jim. . . . Since that head wound down in Mexico, lots of things I don't remember so good any more!" he snapped in irritation.

Flowers said, "Well, I'm recalling it for you, then, Boots. . . . This girl from the *Lucky Lode*, you're losing your head over her. Boots, you oughta know better. They're all alike, them dancehall hussies, sweet-talking and soft-lipped and with the heart of a snake! Why—"

Sam Kilden threw his good leg out of the bed and tried to get up, face blackening with rage. But after almost making it, he had to drop down on the edge of the bed. "Shut up, Jim," he warned. "Shut up, by Gawd!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE RAIN that came with darkness made it a dull night in the *Lucky Lode*. Saddle was

quiet, tamed down, anyway. But it was an ominous quiet, the kind of a quiet that presages a storm. From the balcony, Jen Redall gazed down at the handful of customers. The orchestra had just stopped playing, and she supposed she should sing soon to try to liven things up. Then she saw Gil Lucian, coming from the back, go up to the black-bearded man at the bar. The pair stood talking. It was the third or fourth time, Jen had seen them together like that. Both kept cutting their eyes around steadily as if afraid of being overheard. Jen tongued her lower lip thoughtfully.

When Gil turned away and happened to glance up, she crooked her finger at him, then turned down the upstairs hall to her room. Gil knocked and waited her permission before entering. He smiled weakly, fingering his dark mustache.

"Who was the man with the black beard at the bar?" she asked curtly. When he hesitated, she added, "The one you're always talking to."

"John Lock," he said.

She tapped the table impatiently. "That isn't his name."

"All right. Go down and ask him then."

"I've heard you call him 'Al'."

His eyes avoided her probing ones. Sometimes he felt this woman could read his mind. She moved toward him and dropped a hand on his shoulder, smiling up with a smoldering look in the gray eyes.

"Gil, you don't have to be afraid of me. Why, we're partners, aren't we? Don't I work to help business? Don't you trust me?"

The slow movement of the fingers on his shoulder did it. "All right, Jen. . . . Guess there ain't no harm in your knowing. He—say, you know you took most all the money from the till the last coupla weeks. I—"

"I put it in the bank—for the business, Gil. I told you we ought to enlarge the place and fix it up real nice."

"Well, I could use some dinero, Jen."

"All right. . . . Who is he?"

"He's Al Keys, Sleeper Keys' brother. When he found Sleeper had

been shot, he came back. That's all I know."

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Sleeper Keys' brother. . . and he comes back incognito. . . I see."

"About that dinero you promised. . . ."

"All right." She gave him a scornful look and then drew out the iron box from beneath her bed. She produced a key from inside her bodice and opened it, keeping herself between Gil and the contents. It was just as she relocked it and straightened that he summoned up enough nerve.

THOUGH he feared this serene-faced red-headed woman, though deep inside, he really disliked her, he also desired her. Perhaps it was because she had always been so unattainable. He had been telling himself lately that, after all, she was a woman, and all women were alike. They had to be dominated. Maybe he had been too gentle, too shy, with her. Maybe he should just grab her, show her he was a man not to be trifled with. After all, he was handsome. Those things he had been telling himself, and now he put them into action.

Seizing her from behind, he swung her around, bending her back against the bed. Smiling, he pressed his face down over hers. "Jen, you little minx, it's time we understood each other and—" he started to murmur.

The crack of her hand over his face was like a pistol shot. The next thing he got was a sharp kick in the shins. Her hand struck again, this time jabbing him in the eye. He recoiled a few steps, even crying out. She grabbed a dancing slipper off and began to beat him over the head with it.

Bleating, he beat a retreat through the door, stumbling into the hallway. She threw a few bills, singles too, she had taken from the iron box, at his feet.

"Get out, get out, you puling little pipsqueak!" she cried scornfully. "Go run after your little dancehall hussies! The only reason they play with you is because they think you have some money. You ought to

hear what they say behind your back, you mealy-mouthed fool. Ha-ha! You've never been weaned yet, Gil! Some day you might grow up and be a man—instead of just wearing pants to look like one! Then come around aand maybe—"

Huddled down, he was grabbing up the greenbacks. "Like Boots Kilden, mebbe!" he flung back weakly.

"Yes—like Boots Kilden!" she retorted. And then she swung her foot that was still shod. It caught him in the pants as he crouched, dumped him over ignominiously on his side. Mocking laughter came from the two dancehall girls watching from the balcony.

A few minutes later, after Gil Lucian had skulked down the back stairs, Jen Redall re-emerged, face freshly made up, as serene as ever. She went down to the half empty bar and stood a few feet from the man who called himself John Lock and ordered some wine.

"Good evening, Mr. Lock," she said prettily. She ignored his look of surprise. "Perhaps you don't want to be bothered. But right now, I've got to pretend I'm with some one. There's a man at one of the tables who is always annoying me when I'm alone. I can't stand him. So. . . ."

Lock, Al Keys, moved over protectively. Unlike the late Sleeper, he was a lean medium-sized man with sloping shoulders as if his shirt were too big for him. He was brown-haired, ordinary looking, with restless quick eyes always on the move. He seldom smiled; plainly he was a man brooding on something.

They got to talking. She steered the conversation to tell how she had first come to Saddle City.

"I was so terribly scared. All I really had was a letter to Mr. Keys up in Whisky Row."

"Sleeper Keys?" Al said in his quick harsh voice.

"Yes-s. . . . And before I could get to see him, he was shot." She shifted so that one of her bare shoulders brushed his arm. "A Mr. Fentriss in Ajo wrote the letter for me."

"Never heard of him," said Al Keys, then clamped his mouth shut hard.

"Well," her voice grew intimate, confidential, "perhaps Mr. Fentriss had several names. A lot of men use more than one handle, don't they, Al Keys?"

He galvanized, his whisky glass clinking against the bar. She smiled sultrily, then slowly ran fingers over her red hair as she surveyed herself in the bar mirror.

"Don't worry, Al. Your secret is safe with me. . . ."

IT WAS the morning of the fourth day since the affair at Smoky Creek. Sam Kilden had only been out of bed a few hours. Dressed, he moved slowly, restlessly, about the front office of the jailhouse. He was weak and the wounded leg worked stiffly. It was early, few folks out as yet. Along the main drag there was the sound of shutters being taken down and doors slamming as store-keepers prepared for the day's business. Ribbons of ground mist still drifted close to the earth as the waxing sun sucked the world dry.

Kilden paced up and down, working in the leg and trying to figure things as he had been for days past. Of one thing he was convinced. Red Norman had had no hand in the ambush at the Smoky Creek store. And whoever had staged it had expected him to be toting a roll of dinero. Yet it was more than just a holdup, Kilden knew.

There was no real evidence, no signs. Yet, somehow, Bart Sweedy was the man who seemed to fit the picture. "Sweedy after me — he wants me out of here, of course," he muttered half to himself. But there was no way of hanging anything on him, Sweedy. While he had been laid up, Kilden had sent Pretty Jim nosing around. Sweedy, according to the story, had been asleep half the night in a back room of his Redeye Palace. He even had witnesses. They'd be his men, of course; but he had his alibi.

And now, doubtless, Sweedy would be planning another move; the lawman realized. There was going to be no answer till things were forced out into the open, until Sweedy was compelled to show his hand in a plain

open-and-shut move. "And when that day comes. . . ." He nail-tapped the shiny black butt of one of his guns that lay on the desk.

There was a furtive rapping at the back door of the jailhouse. When Kilden went down the hall and opened up, Gil Lucian, with a quick fearful glance behind himself, slid in.

"I got something to talk to you about, sheriff. . . . A—A kind of—of confession," Gil mouthed, lips twitching.

Kilden smiled slightly as he led the way into the front office. He knew what a weakling this son of the late Ben Lucian was, a vain skirt-chaser lacking the nerve to knock over a jack-rabbit. "Well?"

Gil stayed away from the windows as if he did not want his presence detected there. "Well—uh—Look, Kilden. They's a killer loose in this town, and nobody suspects her either! And I'm not hurrawing you either."

"Her?" repeated the sheriff.

YES. She—uh—" Gil Lucian belched. It had taken three-four strong snorts to give him the nerve to come on this errand. But he was going to pay back that Jen Redall now for the way she had humiliated him. "She worked for my dad. And she killed him; I'm sure, though I ain't got no proof. But she practically admitted it to me." He blurted out the circumstances the night of his father's death, forgetting to mention Jen's name in his excitement. "My dad knew he had a bad heart. He was awful mighty careful on the stairs."

Kilden cocked an eyebrow as he lighted up a tube of Durham. Gil Lucian sounded like a child with some fantastic concocted tale.

"And the night that Joyce fella died down here in the jail," Gil went on. "That was her fault too, I'm sure. Dead sure. I'm as sure she killed him as if I saw her do it with my own eyes. When she come back after he was dead, I heard her dancin' and singing in her room. And she told you, I heard, as how she'd been a nurse once. But—"

Kilden cut in then. "Are you talking about Miss Jen?"

"Sure! Who else did you think, Kilden? It was her killed my dad. And he that killed Joyce, the prisoner, I tell ya. She said she had been a nurse. But one day I heard her talking to a girl at the place. And she told the girl as how she'd married a gambler when she was only a girl, then been in the dncehall game ever after that. So she never was no nurse. And after she killed Joyce, she sent for Bart Sweedy to come see her. That was after she made me witness some paper she'd written and—"

"Shut up, you rat!"

Gil was so worked up he failed to catch the warning note in Sam Kilden's voice. "And now, Kilden, she's planning something else. She's always workin' on men, twisting 'em around her finger. I've heard her boast how she could do that. And she's workin' on another buck now. She—"

"Shut up and drag your tail outa here afore I break your neck!" Kilden cried hoarsely.

"I'm not lying, Mr. Kilden! I'm trying to warn you. I hate to go back on a gent I used to know pretty well. But they's going to be trouble. She'll wrap him around her finger. And Al Keys—"

Then Kilden was on him, smashing away with his balled-up hands despite his bad leg. One blow sent the cringing, whining Gil halfway over the desk.

"You dirty, lying snake! You're worse than a jealous, gossiping hag!" Kilden grabbed up a quirt from the desk. "You'd lie about a decent girl like that because you can't get your paws on her and—" The *sw-swish* of the quirt sliced through his words.

Stumbling, spitting blood from his smashed mouth, Bill Lucian fled down the jail corridor to the back door. After him, Kilden plied the quirt. As Gil yanked the door open, Kilden tore half the shirt from his back and drove him to his knees again with a blow of the plaited rawhide. Gil Lucian went reeling across the jail backyard like a whipped cur.

Kilden stood in the doorway, quivering with rage. "I'll have to get her outa that dance hall . . . I'll have

to. It ain't no fitten place for her. And some day—some day—I'll marry her, if she'll have me. . . .”

CHAPTER XVIII

THOUGH she gave no outward sign of it, Jen Redall was as scared as she had ever been in her life. It was early of the somnolent afternoon with little more than the buzz of drowsy bottle flies in the *Lucky Lode*. She beckoned to Gil, who slouched on a stool at the end of the vacant bar. When he gave no sign at her, she stamped her foot in its riding boot impatiently. Finally he climbed down and slouched over to her. One of his eyes was badly discolored and both were bloodshot from whisky. He lurched as he walked slowly, body sore from the cuts of the quirt that morning.

“Go up Whisky Row and find your friend, Mr. Lock, and tell him I wish to see him,” Jen said, as if addressing the swamper of the place.

He stood staring, heavy-lidded, mouth hanging loose. He thought of refusing to go. Then, dimly, his brain, sodden with alcohol, gathered this might have something to do with that Boots Kilden. And he hated Kilden now, too.

“Mebbe he won't wanta come,” he said thickly. “Mebbe—”

“Lock will come to see me,” the woman came back. “Go get him—now. Now—you drunken pig!”

He went out the side door. Jen sat down at a table and fanned herself as she waited. She knew Gil had gone to see Boots Kilden that morning. That new houseman she had hired—the one who couldn't keep his eyes off her—had followed Gil. With little trouble, she could guess what Gil had told Boots Kilden. Then she had seen Gil skulk in the back way, badly beaten up and whimpering, and she knew what Boots Kilden's reaction had been.

But the situation was too dangerous. Gil had no proof of anything, of course, but there was always the chance proof might turn up. And there was that letter at the bank, the letter relating the alleged confession of Joyce, Sweedy's hired gunman.

That, Jen realized, now that Gil had talked, could be turned against her.

For a moment, she bit her lower lip indecisively. Then her mouth closed firmly. She had made her decision; she would stick to it. Mere passing feelings, the urge of her blood, would not stand in the way. Besides, she held the reins pretty completely now. She had that letter like a club over Sweedy's head; she no longer needed the sheriff as a counter-balance to Sweedy.

A soft smile parted her lips as the lean, bearded Lock came in the side door with Gil shambling after him. The latter went down to the end of the bar and climbed back onto his stool and thumped for a fresh drink. He seemed to have no interest in anything else.

“We have some private business, Al Keys,” Jen said softly as she rose, gave him her hand, then led the way to one of the private rooms in the rear.

“I'm just back here to see 'bout my brother's business affairs,” Keys said guardedly after a drink had been brought back for him. “I don't want no trouble. I'm not looking for a job or anything.”

Jen Redall leaned back in the chair, eyes lidded, lips curved in a sarcastic smile. “Of course. You wouldn't love to put lead in Boots Kilden—or anything. Why, you don't even carry a grudge against him, do you?”

Keys' hand jerked into a fist and he pulled it off the table quickly. “I'm not looking for trouble.”

“Of course not. What you mean is—you don't want to get gunned by Kilden when you try to avenge your brother, Mr. Sleeper Keys.”

Venom shot into his eyes and he stared hard at the floor. “Kilden is a crack gunslinger. Any man'd be a fool to go up against him face to face. They say he has a charmed life, that he's got the Devil's own luck. So . . .”

She let her eyes idly follow the strand of smoke weaving up from his quirly. The quirly was half brown, stained by the sweat from his fingers. “There might be another way of get-

ting this Kilden—instead of face to face."

He tongued his lips nervously. "Spit it out! What're you driving at, woman?"

SHE told how she and Boots Kilden rode up the creek road, described the spot at the bend where they were accustomed to dismount and sit and talk. "There's a big clump of willows just below the spot. A man in the clump would never be seen. . . ."

There were some moments of silence between them. Then Keys stood up and kicked back his chair, scowling.

"Sure, I've heard talk the sheriff was real sweet on you, woman. What kind of a trick is this? Why would you—would you do this?"

Jen Redall leaned across the table with narrowed eyes. "I had a sister. Kilden doesn't know this girl was my sister because I use my first husband's name. Kilden's probably forgotten all about her, too. . . . It was years back that he rode out one night and deserted her." Her nails dug into the table top. She was a superb actress. "I've let Kilden take me riding so as I could learn all about him."

Al Keys sat down again. "I see. . . . And when do you figger you and Kilden'll be out at the creek again?"

"I can see to it he'll be up there late this afternoon. A man in the willows, he could shoot and get away without ever being seen."

Keys studied a broken thumb-nail, saying nothing.

She went on in a low, persuasive voice. She told how the signal would be her kissing Kilden, then turning to walk off toward the trail. That would put Kilden's back to the elbow of the creek where the willows grew. "But give me time to get clear," she added quickly.

Keys poked at the black dirt under the thumb-nail, then slowly shook his head. "It's too much of a risk. Kilden's faster 'n a snake with his hoglegs. . . . No. . . . Too risky. Why, I've had men tell me Boots Kilden was faster 'n Bat Masterson or Clay Allison of the Washita. He—"

She broke in softly. "I told you I rode out with Kilden so I could learn all about him. . . . Yes, maybe this Boots Kilden was fast. Boots. . . . But this man is not *Boots* Kilden."

"What? How do you know?" Al Keys said hoarsely.

"Never mind. But I know. I saw this man over in Ajo a couple of weeks before I came here. Yet he claims, as Boots Kilden, that he came directly up here after crossing the Line. . . . And he's made some slips in talking to me. *I know*. Believe that. And he is not the famous Boots Kilden!"

Al Keys wetted his lips as his eyes seemed to catch fire. He jerked at his beard nervously. "Now, how far are them willows from the spot where you and him sit, Miss Jen?"

WHEN Sam Kilden got the note from Miss Jen asking him to meet her at their spot out on the creek, he never hesitated. He told Ruchter to saddle up his horse. He was glad Pretty Jim had gone out for a bite to eat; the right-hand man of the real Boots Kilden might have insisted on going along. The note worried him some, though. She said it was an urgent matter, that she had something important to tell him.

"Think you oughta ride with that leg of yours?" young Phil Hare asked as he came in. The sheriff said it would be all right. "Don't go far from town," Hare added. "They's a heap of talk around that Red Norman has sworn to walk clean into Hell to git you."

Kilden shrugged it off as he rode out of the jailyard. All he could think about was Jen. Out at the spot on the creek, he had to wait almost half an hour before she rode up. He didn't know that twice on the way out she had almost turned back. When he tried to take her in his arms, though, she held him off, grave-faced.

"What's this thing you had to tell me?" he said when they were seated on the grass and she remained silent.

She shook her head impatiently. "Let's not talk about that now. It—it's just that Gil Lucian is saying things about me. I won't have any-

thing to do with him and—and—well, I'll tell you on the ride back. Let's enjoy this while we're here, Boots."

She took his hand and leaned against his shoulder. They talked little; Kilden was just content to be with her. Once he said:

"I could never go away from you—and be happy again." It was the reflection of the grim resolve building in his mind. Come what might, Hell or high water, he was going to stick it out in Saddle, try to clean up this place called "Hell's Last Stand." Then he'd collect Samson Curp's five thousand dollar reward for the job and be able to offer Jen marriage.

The Sentinels turned a purplish-blue with the ragged peak tops ruddy as the westering sun sank lower. Jen's eyes cut over to the willows. She pulled away from Kilden's arm and stood up abruptly. Her face was as hard as something hewn from stone and he sensed the change in her.

"Jen, what's the matter?" he asked, low.

Whipping around, she grabbed his shoulders and raised her face. Kilden's senses were reeling when finally their lips parted. Never before had even she kissed him like that. Never. The blood torrented through his veins. Her face was blurred before his wild eyes. Instinctively he tried to grab her to him again.

"Wait there." Her voice was cold, commanding, as she walked up toward the trail.

And, not knowing he had been given a Judas kiss, Sam Kilden obeyed. Waited, a perfect target for Al Keys, who pushed his gun through the curtain of willow foliage.

JEN was perhaps five yards away when her feelings overcame her iron will. Her head turned slightly. Sotto-voice, but with panic coloring it with compelling urgency, she said: "Boots—down for your life!"

Again he obeyed, slamming himself flat. The gun from the willows roared out. Lead blasted the air where Kilden's back had been. He rolled. Al Keys triggered twice more, frantic. Kilden was in a patch of high grass, yanking hoglegs from his holsters as he came to his knees. He glimpsed

Jen, down too. She had scratched her cheek on a broken twig. Blood ran down her face. He thought she had been hit. The rage of Hell itself erupted in him.

He came up and headed for the willows, not caring about anything save to get the man who'd shot Jen. He wobbled on his bad leg. Al Keys shot twice more, then grabbed for a second gun. He triggered that once, nicked Kilden's hat. And still Kilden kept closing in. Keys turned and fled. The wind, rising with the approach of sundown, parted the fringe of willow fronds. Kilden shot for the first time and nicked the fleeing Keys in the leg.

Keys fell to his knees. Then he twisted around to make a last stand. His weapon felt puny in his hand. He shot once more, then Kilden jumped sideward, steadied a split second, and put a slug through his right forearm. Keys' weapon flew from his fingers. He cried out. And then Kilden was on him to beat him flat with a blow of the gun barrel across the sombrero. Kilden stood over him, smoking guns levelled down at the prone, unconscious body. He was primed to kill.

Jen's voice stopped him. "Boots—Boots! Are you all right?"

He saw her running toward the willows, wiping at the scratch on her face, and realized she was all right. Slowly he let his Colts dangle and did not pour lead into Al Keys' body.

CHAPTER XIX

SADDLE buzzed like a hornets' nest. Folks steadily passed back and forth in front of the jail-house, gazing up at the second floor. Sometimes they glimpsed the new prisoner, Al Keys, as he appeared at the barred window a moment. Ruchter had promptly identified him when he had been brought in. There was grim talk going the rounds of a necktie party. Why waste time going through the motions of a trial. The dirty snake had tried to bushwhack the great Boots Kilden, hadn't he?

Sam Kilden himself sat behind the big rolltop desk and went back over the incident, sifting detail after detail. He smelled skunk sweat some-

where but he couldn't put his finger on it. There was some little detail, he knew, that would provide the answer. Yet he couldn't dig it out. The ride back, after he had revived the knocked-out Keys with creek water and pushed him up into the saddle, had been in almost complete silence. Keys rode with head bowed; sullen, wordless save to complain at times about the pain of his wounded arm.

And Jen, so pale it scared Kilden, had said scarcely a word either. Kilden lifted his eyes to glance out the window at the coal-oil torches flickering beside the doorways of bar-rooms and honky tonks along the road. He had cross-examined Keys when they got him inside the jail, trying to find out if anybody was behind him. The prisoner had refused to say anything. Al Keys had not heard Jen's low-called warning to Kilden. Keys figured it was just that incredible renowned luck of Boots Kilden again. Keys was fatalistic about it, accepting the fact that he would die soon.

Kilden, a little after bringing him in, had called at the *Lucky Lode* to see if Jen was all right. She'd met him with eyes red with weeping and berating herself.

"It was my fault, my fault, Boots, that you were almost killed," she moaned. "One of the girls told me he had been asking her a lot of questions about us. But—but I thought he was just a jealous, curious man. I—I—even heard him talking at the bar this afternoon. He was saying something about how you weren't the real Boots Kilden. I—I laughed when I heard that. It—it sounded so ridiculous."

Kilden had patted her shoulder and tried to quiet her, telling her she had saved his life.

She had shaken her head. "He—he could even accuse me of working with him. He could say I—I lured you out there, after telling him I would. Actually, I'm just a stranger in Saddle. I have no friends."

"You think I'd believe any locoed story like that from him, Jen?" Kilden had cried, taking her in his arms.

But now, sitting in the jail office,

he still had the feeling there was something unexplained, something that didn't quite ring true, about the whole thing.

Half a dozen citizens came marching up the jail steps. In the corner, Pretty Jim Flowers came out of his chair, hands hooking into his gun-belt. Kilden reached for a Colts that lay beside his Stetson. They weren't going to drag the prisoner out for a necktie party. No. He, Sam Kilden, was rodding the Law in Saddle. . . .

* * *

BART SWEEDY entered the *Lucky Lode* by the back door, trotted up the rear stairs quickly, and saw Jen waiting for him halfway along the upper hall. They went into her room. Sweedy swept off his sombrero and framed a smile on his chinless face.

"Miss Jen, you sure do look plumb ravishin' this evening." He deliberately looked sheepish, shifted his boots as if ill at ease.

She smiled, laughed a little inwardly. All men were alike. She was certain she had Sweedy almost at her feet, too. She could use him, wind him around her finger. Seating herself, she indicated another chair.

"You said you had something important to talk about."

Sweedy carefully placed his big hat squarely on his lap. "Miss Jen, you're a smart woman." He made a wry face. "I ought to know."

"A girl has to look out for herself. Nobody else will."

Sweedy looked at her timidly as if he'd like to take over that little chore in her place. But it was an act; he read this woman, knew she was nothing but ice and iron, as ruthless as any man whose trail he had ever crossed.

"That was a close call Kilden had today," he said tentatively. He had a hunch, a strong one, this woman had had something to do with it, too.

"Yes," she said, offered nothing else.

"I—I have nothing against Kilden. Nothing personal, mind you. It's just—well, if he ran this town like

he wants to, he'd drive all business out. You and me, we wouldn't make nothing hardly. Kilden don't understand. He—well, he's just being Samson Curp's tool to run the rest of us outa business."

"Let me have it with the bark off, Sweedy," the girl said harshly.

"I'd like to see Boots Kilden clear out, go somewhere else."

Jen was too nervous from the afternoon's episode to hide her reaction that time. The gray eyes jumped, glittering eagerly for a moment. Her emotions had betrayed her that afternoon. Now, she realized, she would not feel safe till Boots Kilden had ridden away.

"Well, just suggest it to him," she said sarcastically.

Sweedy swallowed. "Money has a way of talking."

She shook her head. "I don't think you can buy Boots Kilden out."

"I wasn't going to try." He stood up, pacing about, the whisky on his breath strong in the small room. "Al Keys has been smuggling down on the Rio. He's made plenty of dinero."

She frowned, not understanding.

He went on, "Suppose Keys was to escape, to be ghosted from the jail mysteriously, without explanation. No shooting—no nothing. Then, suppose a thousand dollars, say, was to be found in Kilden's desk. And somebody came along with a story that Keys had bought his way out. Well?"

JEN rose and turned to stare out the side window into the night. This would settle all her problems. Keys would be spirited away before he involved her. And, caught with a bribe, Boots Kilden would be forced to quit Saddle City.

"But how will you get Keys away?" she asked, turning.

It was Sweedy's turn to smile inwardly. He had figured her exactly, he told himself. "Some of my boys will take care of that. If we can just git inside the jailhouse—mebbe while they's a shooting at the other end of the town to keep Kilden busy. If we can just have that cell unlocked for us . . ." He waited.

She walked about then. Shrugged. "Well, how?"

Sweedy said, "That young moon-eyed deputy, Hare, he sure comes around here an awful lot. A heap! The button makes me jealous, Miss Jen. . . . And I'm danged sure he don't drop in so often to pass the time of day with the drink wrangler." He stepped close behind her shoulder. "And you know a man would do anything for you. Gawd knows I would. Anything."

She laughed low and looked up at him with that enigmatic smile. "I'll see to it Phil Hare pays a visit in a little while. Then I'll send you word, Bart. . . . But, how soon can you arrange things?"

"We can work it tonight—soon's I get word from you. . . . Miss Jen, you and me, we're smart. As partners, we can run Saddle together."

She let him kiss her. Sweedy's lips were cold and dry. They started no tempest swirling inside her as Boots Kilden's mouth could. She wanted to forget that. She kissed Sweedy again, just to make certain she had him enthralled.

When Sweedy left, by the back door again, he got off in the shadows and clamped his hand over his mouth and laughed away. No woman could outsmart him. "We can run Saddle together," he repeated his own words. Then he laughed again. That was good. A woman, pitting herself against him! Ha!

He, Sweedy, knew how to use people. He would use her just as he was going to use the enraged Red Norman. His men would take Keys down to Monte in the brush country. Keys would be a decoy. Then, after he was out of office, perhaps run out of Saddle, the tip would be given Kilden that Keys was down there. Sweedy chuckled again.

Of course Kilden would go slamming down there to grab the escaped prisoner. It would be Kilden's one chance to exonerate himself on the bribery charge. And Red Norman, apprised that Kilden was heading for Monte, would be there and waiting with lead to settle the old score.

"Mighty complicated—but neat," Sweedy complimented himself as he strode along toward his own place.

Boots Kilden would be blasted down by Norman all right. The rustler would ambush him in Monte.

"And then Saddle will be mine for the plucking," he told himself. "Mine. . . . 'We run Saddle.' . . . Haha! I'll take care of that wench first off. . . . First off. . . . And after she's killed by a stray bullet in the blow-off, good-hearted Bart Sweedy will see she has a real fancy funeral. . . ."

CHAPTER XX

WHEN things started, they happened with an almost kaleidoscopic swiftness. Kilden didn't even know the prisoner, Al Keys, was missing when the storm first broke.

After making his last round of the whisky mills and dives just before the town closed down, he had paused to have a few words with Samson Curp at his door. Little Curp, standing and inhaling the fresh air in his flawless gray garb, seemed slightly distant as they talked about the attempt on Kilden's life that afternoon. His attitude was strangely impersonal. It was as if he conversed with a man he did not know too well; Kilden could feel it.

"A lawman rules not by the authority of the Law alone," Curp finally summarized it. "Nor by the speed of his draw alone, either, Kilden. It's his reputation, the awe he personally puts into men. So now they're beginning to shoot at you, eh?" He tapped the gold snuff box slowly. "That's bad, very bad."

Kilden had returned to the jailhouse, pondering the words and Curp's attitude. Phil Hare was there. Kilden had asked about the prisoner. Hare said he had just brought him up a drink of whisky to help him get to sleep. Before he had turned in, Kilden himself had gone upstairs for a look at the gent who'd tried to gun him. Strangely, he felt no particular enmity. Keys seemed to be sleeping heavily, wrapped in the blanket, face toward the wall. Kilden hadn't bothered to enter the cell lest he waken the poor devil. He'd probably hang soon enough if he wasn't sent to the

Big House for a long stretch. Then the sheriff had turned in.

It was still dark when he was wakened by the pounding on the door. As he came out of the bed and reached for the gunbelt slung over the chair beside him, he caught the angry voices out in the road. He pulled on a pair of jeans, calling to Jim Flowers. They'd probably come for the prisoner; he had figured they might, sooner or later.

Flowers came in, lashing on his fancy brass-studded gunbelt. "Looks like trouble," he said casually. He hand-combed his rumpled hair.

RUCHTER came in too; it was his night on duty at the jail and he had been dozing in a room at the rear instead of going home. Kilden told him to guard the back door, then strode into the office.

"What the devil do you want?" he called out.

"We aim to see the prisoner, Keys," a man outside replied.

"Not at this hour! You can go to hell," Kilden called.

There was a heap of jabbering outside. Arguing. "Sure, he ain't going to let us see Keys because he ain't got him here!" the sheriff heard one man cry hotly.

"Keys has escaped! We know it, Kilden!"

"You dang jugheads! Go home and sleep it off," Kilden shot back coldly.

"You let Keys go, Kilden!" another man shouted.

Shooting a glance out of the dark room through one of the barred windows, Kilden saw lamps going on along the main drag, and more men were hustling along toward the jailhouse in twos and threes.

"Something's wrong," whispered Pretty Jim. "These gents ain't licked." He picked the ring of keys from the desk and headed for the back stairs.

Then there was a lull outside. And a calm, dry voice addressed Sam Kilden. "I think you better let us in, Mr. Kilden." It was Samson Curp, and Kilden noted the "mister" Curp had put before his name.

Going over, Kilden lifted the bar from the heavy front door, slid the

bolt, then twisted the big key. They didn't rush in. Slowly, gravely, they walked in, a handful of the leading businessmen of Saddle. They stopped short as Kilden, who had backed to the desk, threw a gun on them.

"Stand right there, gents, and state your business," he told them.

They pushed Slow Joe Wing, owner of a barroom in the town, forward. He cleared his throat several times, pulled off his sombrero, nervously rubbed his head, bald as an egg.

"Uh—this ain't a lynching party, Mr. Kilden. But—uh—er you sure you got Keys upstairs?"

"Of course I'm sure," Kilden snapped back. "Why do—"

Then Flowers returned from above, coming along the hall. Sam Kilden took one look at his face and knew. Keys wasn't up in the cell.

"Let's go up and see him, then! Let's go up!" several of the men behind Wing began to insist. "If he's there, we'll see him and—"

"He isn't there," said Pretty Jim Flowers slowly. "He's gone. Mebbe he's been gone for hours. Somebody stuffed up his blanket so it looked like a sleeping body. Now git the hell out so we can organize a posse and—"

"Who the hell's giving orders now—another crooked lawman?" one of those backing Slow John Wing blurted. "Looks like your story is right, John."

"Sure! The prisoner's gone like you heard he was, ain't he?"

Kilden flicked his eyes to Curp once. The gambling king stared slightly to the left of the sheriff, his sheriff, as if he had never seen him before. That was the tipoff to Sam Kilden.

"What story?" he drawled sarcastically.

Slow John Wing cleared his throat again. And then he blurted it out parrot fashion. How some stranger had gotten orey-eyed drunk in his place. And when they'd closed up, they'd left the gent sleeping on a table. Then, a little while ago, Wing had heard the man stumbling around and had come downstairs. The man was awake and trying to get himself

another drink before he left. Wing had given him a shot of whisky.

"And then he got talking—talking about this Al Keys and how he wasn't goin' to hang." Wing wiped his mouth. "He—this stranger—he said as how Keys was buying his freedom. He—uh—well—" Sweat studded his forehead as he wilted under Sam Kilden's cold stare.

"Go ahead, John," a man prodded him.

"Tell your story, Wing," Samson Curp said.

WING cleared his throat. "This fella said Al Keys had had a friend bring in a thousand dollars for him. That he was givin' it to the sheriff and would git his freedom in return. That was what he said. He—"

"Where is this stranger?" Kilden asked sarcastically.

Wing mopped his bald head. He said the man had left, ridden off. He said he thought the gent was just talking through his sky-piece. Then he got to thinking. And then he went out and told some friends what he had heard. Now, they were here.

Kilden's laugh cut in on the man. Flowers chuckled and slapped his leg. "Sure," said Sam Kilden. "Sure. I let the man go who tried to put a window in my skull! I—"

"But the man is gone!" cried one of Wing's backers. "An' mebbe that thousand dollars is 'round here somewhere. Mebbe if we look in the desk an—"

Kilden's gun jumped level again. "And who in blazes are you chunk-heads to search my desk, by grab!" he cried heatedly, temper slipping.

He cut his eyes toward Flowers. Flowers had his hand filled, backing him to the hilt. Everybody started shouting and haranguing. Then in the uproar, men streamed up the hallway from the rear. Ruchter had abandoned his post at the back door when he saw the way the tide was running. A gun was rammed in Flowers' back. Men swarmed around behind Kilden, pushing him roughly.

"Search his desk! Search his desk!" they cried.

The inkwell was spilled. Papers were scattered on the floor, a pair of handcuffs bouncing off the cuspidor. Drawers ransacked. There was a shout of triumph. And a gent was shaking out one of a pair of old gloves found in the desk. A neatly tied roll of bills fell onto the desktop in the light of the lamp one of them had fired up. The room became suddenly silent.

Kilden goggled at the chunk of dinero, then managed a shrug. "I never saw that dinero before. . . . I don't know how it got there."

There were jeers and guffaws. "Do we need any more evidence than that?" demandd Wing.

With a quick move, Kilden got his back against the front wall. He still held his Colts. "Look, you blind pelicans! I said I know nothing about that dinero. Let me hit the trail. I'll ride through Hell itself if I have to to bring back Al Keys. . . . Then you'll know—"

"Let him hit the trail—and he'll never come back!" sneered one gent. They started to push forward.

Kilden cocked his gun and sought Samson Curp's eyes. A few words from Curp and they'd stop, listen. But Curp was blank-faced and cold-eyed. He did step forward though. The din ceased. Curp took off his stove-pipe hat and studied it as he spoke.

"We have no actual proof that Mr. Kilden accepted a bribe. On the other hand," he said, stating the facts coldly, "there is that sizable amount of money Mr. Kilden is unable to explain. I suggest—I suggest that Mr. Kilden resign his office and leave town. It is the simplest way out. There is enough trouble boiling in Saddle City now without destroying respect for the Law any further."

There was a prolonged moment of silence. Then some of the cooler-headed ones began to nod. Wing faded into the background. Curp's words won out. On top of everything else, nobody wanted to force a lead-sliding showdown with this gunning fool, Boots Kilden.

Curp walked over to Kilden, regarding him impersonally. "Mr.

Kilden, I think you'd better turn over your badge to me—then hit the trail. . . ."

And Kilden recalled then Samson Curp's words about how he always dropped a loser. . . .

* * *

THEY had been riding since dawn, Sam Kilden and Pretty Jim Flowers who'd stuck with him. They were on the trail that curved southward from Saddle toward Teconah. It was high noon of a blistering hot day with every puff of wind from the low hills like a backblast from an oven. They had pulled in and dismounted in a patch of cottonwoods beside the trail to rest their ponies and munch some cold grub.

Sam Kilden had had little to say since they had saddled up and ridden out of Saddle City in disgrace. He hadn't even tried to see Jen Redall before departing. She wouldn't want to see a man practically convicted of selling out his own Law, he knew. He was hurt, embittered, and could feel the old wildness surging deep inside him. It seemed like the oft-repeated story. Once again he had tried to play it straight, and in vain. There was another element, one that rose slowly to the surface of his consciousness. He had failed, failed as the law-bringer in Saddle City. He hadn't suspected that would bother him. But it did.

A couple of times he had been on the verge of revealing his true identity to Pretty Jim, of telling him how he wasn't really Boots Kilden, the man he so strangely resembled. And he knew he would do so soon. But right now, he wanted somebody along with him.

Pretty Jim had finished his grub and fired up one of his tailor-made quirries. Now he drew out a small pocket mirror, his comb, and began to put his yellow locks in place meticulously. And to talk.

"Boots, let's pick up a few of the old bunch and ride again. What the devil—they gave you the dirty end of the stick back there! So let's show

CHAPTER XXI

'em." He smiled into the mirror, recollecting the old days. "I know where we can git hold of Finlay, little One-Eye. Charlie Frogg's bartending up in Centerville. And the Knapp brothers, they got a two-bit hoss ranch somewhere in the Mogollon country. And—"

Sam Kilden had started to shake his head. Better to tell Flowers the truth now and get it over with. He stood up. And there was the cloppity-clop of hoof-beats coming down the alkali strip of trail. Both men reacted instinctively, slipping behind cover as they drew. A squat rider rounded the bend and headed on for the little bridge across the gulch beyond.

Kilden recognized him. It was his former deputy, Ruchter. Something made the ex-sheriff shout out. Ruchter sawed on the reins and twisted a look over his shoulder as Kilden stepped into view. Then the deputy came trotting back.

"Howdy, boss. I was hoping I'd catch up to yuh," he said.

"What's the matter? Do they want me to return so they can decorate a cottonwood with me?"

"No. I got some news." Ruchter sleeved dust from his mouth. "Somebody rode into town with word Al Keys is down in Monte. Seems he's dang sick an' hiding out in a friend's place down there. It's the Greasewood Bar."

KILDEN felt himself galvanize. "So they're sending out a posse for him, eh?"

Ruchter shook his head. "Nope. Nobody seems to give a dang. I figgered—mebbe—"

Kilden galvanized as it flashed through his mind with fresh hope pulsing in his veins. This was his chance to eventually return to Saddle and Jen Redall. If he could get to Monte in time to grab Al Keys, bring him back to Saddle and make him admit there had been no bribery. Make him tell, in fact, who had snaked him out of that jail. . .

Pretty Jim Flowers pulled on his sombrero and said to Ruchter, "How long a ride is it to Monte?"

THEY had to push through rough broken country to cut across to Monte in the brushlands below Saddle City. There were razor-backed ridges and great stretches of black chaparral with winding animal paths through them. They had to swing southward through Duffy's Canyon in a detour, then hit east again toward Monte. Within a few hours after sunset, their ponies were bogged down. Though Kilden fumed with impatience, there was nothing to do but make camp.

It was the next forenoon, with a thin drizzle blurring the land scape, that, chilled to the bone, they rode out of a brush trail above Monte. It was a mean drab settlement sprawled across sandy flats with a big windmill poking up in the center. It had a half-deserted look. A couple of starved-looking cow critters strayed at one end of the ragged street. Kilden and Pretty Jim surveyed it for a couple of minutes from a low knob to the north. Then they started to ride in, cutting onto the main trail.

"Hey, hey, Mr. Kilden!" A plump man wearing a big Mex-style anthill sombrero came running from a hovel beside the road. "Wait, amigo! Please, amigo—wait!"

Kilden peered through the moisture-veiled atmosphere and recognized him. Vasco Jones, the half-Mexican business man from Saddle. The ex-sheriff jumped a gun on him. Like an innocent man with nothing to fear, Vasco Jones came running on. He pated:

.. "Don't go into town, Senor Kilden! She is a trap!"

"What?"

At Kilden's stirrup, the stubby man removed his sombrero and struggled for breath. "The trap—for you—in there!" he got out.

"What kind of a trick is this?" Flowers put in.

"Sweedy's trick," puffed Vasco Jones. "Yesterday, he gets really drunk—like I never see heem before. He talk one hell of a lot. I hear."

"Al Keys is in there and—" Kilden started.

"An' so is Red Norman," broke in Jones.

"What?"

"Si, amigo. Norman, he is in Sweedy's pay—like you say. Sweedy, he tells Norman you weel be coming into Monte here. Si. Norman, he hates you for the doublecross. He is down there now—ready to drygulch you, Senor Kilden." He fanned himself with his hat. "Me, I ride like hell to get down here to stop you. Me, I'm seeck of all this double-cross. So—go back, amigo. Don't go in. You weel be killed. . . ."

Kilden leaned from the kak to grip the little Mexican's shoulder quickly in a gesture of gratitude. It was good to find one decent man in Saddle who believed in him, who stood by. Then the ex-sheriff's mouth hardened.

"Al Keys is in there. Right? . . . Then I'm going in an' drag him out somehow," he muttered "I'm going in despite Norman. I—"

Flowers caught at Kilden's arm. "Boots, for the lova Gawd, wait till after dark anyways."

"Keys might be gone then. . . . Jim, you stay outa this. Me, I'll slip in somehow. I'll—Jim, let go of me! I gotta do it. I gotta go back to that woman with a clean name and—"

KILDEN ripped free. Then Jim Flowers was pointing down at the other, south, side of the town. Through the misty air they could see a horseman sloping into the single street. A figure walking along the street ran frantically and ducked around the corner of a shack. The rider from the south neared the middle of the settlement, where a lane straggled off from the street. And gunshots ripped the air. Muzzle flame leaped from windows, doorways, from a store and a barroom at the corners.

The rider's cayuse, hit, whinnied wildly and reared in pain. The rider lit running, his own swiftly drawn weapons blinking back at the barrage of fire that poured at him. Kilden and Jim Flowers had already thrown the spur steel to their ponies and were tearing down toward the town. They

saw the lone man, who'd ridden into the trap meant for Sam Kilden, waver, stumble. Then he went down in the damp dust, crimson spurting from the side of his head. He lay motionless.

Men rushed out from all sides. The galloping Kilden picked out the big, black-garbed figure of Red Norman. Horses were rushed from an alley. As Norman ran toward the down man, Kilden began to trigger, though the distance was too great for accurate shooting. Norman turned and leaped into the saddle of one of the ponies as his men hurriedly mounted too. Then Norman swung his animal over beside the down figure and triggered. The next moment he and his men were wheeling, bolting down the lane toward the dense jungle of mesquite beyond that side of Monte.

It was done and over like that, almost as quick as the snap of a finger.

In the van, Kilden swung into the street, tore past the prone figure, and cut into the lane. But the Norman outfit had already made the mesquite. To push in there alone after them would be sheer madness. He swung back into the street. Dismounted, Jim Flowers was on one knee beside the man who smacked into the ambush trap. Kilden rode up and jumped down. The poor devil seemed dead, blood smearing the side of his head. He lay unmoving. And then Flowers had straightened, face a blanched, twisted mask of pure fury, his gun swinging to cover Sam Kilden. He swung the gun barrel and knocked Sam Kilden's loosely held weapon from his grip. Flowers' other hand shot out to snag Kilden's second gun from its scabbard.

"You—you dirty two-bit! You damn tinhorn! You faker!" Pretty Jim Flowers cried in an emotion-torn, thin voice trembling with the rage that fired his blood. "You—you—" There weren't words for what he wanted to say to Sam Kilden. He raised his gun barrel again to deliver a blow. "A dirty little snake like you—costing Boots Kilden his life! Ya—"

Sam Kilden was staring down at the man in the dust. It was like a mirage, almost as if he stared into a mirror.

The man on the ground was enough like him to be his brother. The same flat body, though a trifle heavier. The flat-cheeked face with the high cheekbones. His hat had fallen off and there was the same black hair strangely unmussed though it differed in being slightly frosted with gray at the temples. There was the bleak look even though the hombre's eyes were closed.

Sam Kilden knew he was looking at the real Boots Kilden; looking at the man he had posed as. Looking at Boots Kilden who had ridden into his death because Red Norman had mistaken him, naturally enough, for the Kilden who had been sheriff of Saddle.

Flowers was raving, half out of his mind. "I'm going to kill ya, two-bit! I'm a-going to blast ya down fer a snake like what—"

"Jim Flowers, quit that jaw-flap-pin'—an'—an' git me a stiff shot of gila spit, will you?" Boots Kilden was half-raised on an elbow, eyes open. . . .

THEY carried him into the saloon, the *Greasewood Bar* where Al Keys was supposed to be. He fainted again but opened his eyes after they worked some redeye down his throat. A basin of water and some rags were brought and Sam Kilden himself carefully washed away the blood from the head wound. It was then they saw that Boots Kilden had only been creased, the slug furrowing his scalp and knocking him out momentarily. It was just a matter of staunching the blood flow.

In a few more minutes, the real Boots Kilden had his head up and his eyes wide as he sat in the chair. He looked around with a crooked smile.

"Say, Jim," he said to Flowers, "who in blazes were those buzzards who jumped me? Two years back I was pardoned by the governor. And—" Then the bleak eyes picked out Sam Kilden, stared, and slowly fired up. "Sam—Sam, my boy," Boots Kilden husked.

Sam Kilden stood shaking with emotion, though he wasn't completely surprised. Out there in the

road, looking down at this man, he had sensed it. This must be his father, somehow.

Boots Kilden tried to force himself up out of the chair. "Sam—my son!"

Then Sam was over before him, wrapping his arms around Boots Kilden's shoulders. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

TALK was awkward, words hard to find at first. It was a surprise, a shock to both the older and younger man. They all had a drink. Boots Kilden, speaking embarrassedly, said Sam was a fine looking button. Pretty Jim just stood staring from one to the other. Another drink and things loosened up some. Boots Kilden told how he had recrossed the Border once more because he wanted to see his grown son.

"But, Boots—uh—Dad, I mean—well, what about that man I thought was my dad?" Sam asked.

Boots Kilden explained. That man was Sam's uncle, Boots' own brother. "I left you with him and told him to raise you as his own—I told him to tell you he was your pop and that I was no relation." Boots smiled crookedly in the same way Sam Kilden had. "You see—well, my life, my kind of life, was no good. I wanted you brought up decent and—straight. . . . What do you do now, son?"

Sam said he had been sheriff of Saddle, and Pretty Jim took up the story as the younger Kilden hesitated. He gave Boots, his old boss, the whole picture. "They framed Sam, Boots," he finished.

Boots Kilden nodded, with narrowed eyes. "And then were going to murder him down here, eh?" He rubbed his now-bandaged head.

Sam Kilden got up abruptly. He went over and talked to the sly-faced little owner of the barroom, tapping a gun butt significantly. The man paled, then nodded, and led him into the rear. In a mangy little bedroom, Sam Kilden found Al Keys, the escaped prisoner. He lay under a smelly blanket, an empty whisky bottle and a half-filled one on a box be-

side him. He was flushed with fever and half delirious as well as drunk. The ride down from Saddle had caused his wounded leg to swell up. And he was suffering from concussion as a result of that gun-barrel crack over the skull Kilden had given him back at the creek.

Sam Kilden shook him till he came out of his fog for a moment. Al Keys couldn't tell him much. Somebody had unlocked the door of his cell and masked men had entered and taken him out. But en route to Monte, he had picked out one of them, a man he'd known in the past. "He's one of Bart Sweedy's boys," Keys mumbled. "Seemed crazy, Sweedy—Sw-Sweedy savin' me. Gimme a drink. . . ."

Kilden had figured all the way that it had been a new move of Sweedy's. He stood at the back of the barroom a moment, looking at his great father, figuring. Then it came to him. Red Norman would, logically, go back to Saddle to report to Sweedy that Boots Kilden was dead. And then Hell would bust its lid sky-high!

"Dad," Sam Kilden said as he walked up to the table, "I—I don't like to leave you after just finding you. But—well, I gotta go back to Saddle. Them drygulchers, Red Norman and his outfit, they'll be heading back there. And—well, I gotta go back."

Boots Kilden lifted a hand. "Don't do it, Sam. I know how you're a-figuring. They tried to burn me down and revenge— Look, Sam, I've lived a sight longer than you. Revenge is never worth it. Like it says in the Good Book, 'Vengeance belongs to the Lord.' Jus' forgit 'em and—"

Sam shyly dropped a hand on his dad's shoulder. "It's more than that, Dad. There's a girl back there. . . . That Sweedy will take over the town. And—and she'll be in danger."

Boots Kilden sighed. "Is she a nice girl, Sam?"

Sam's hand tightened. "She's wonderful, Dad. I—I want to marry her—if she'll have me."

Boots Kilden nodded. Then he rose, hitched at his gunbelt and tested his legs. "All right, Sam. . . . Only both Kildens will go back. . . ."

THE sun had dipped beyond the western horizon about an hour when the two Kildens and Pretty Jim Flowers rounded the bend on the slope eastward of Saddle City. They had already noted the red glare reflected against the sky in the dusk. Now they saw it was the impressive white structure of the bank that was burning. And even though they were more than a mile away, the crackle of wild gunfire and screams carried to them on the night breeze. Saddle was being swept by a reign of terror. Heartless, greedy, Bart Sweedy was sacking Saddle, throwing his gun toughs amok as they finished shooting down all opposition in Whisky Row and swept through the streets, berserk. Aiding them, grabbing at the opportunity to loot, were the tinhorns and saddle bums and cheap triggermen who infested the town.

"It's happened," said Sam Kilden hoarsely as they watched a moment.

Boots Kilden was checking the chambers of his guns. Jim Flowers rubbed his mouth. He said there were only three of them. Boots spat into the dust.

"We never counted heads in the old days, Jim," he reminded him. "And they's two Kildens riding now. . . . We won't kill our ponies afore we git in. Then—then we slam down the main drag, hit 'em afore they know it. Try to keep together. And Sam, git us to the ringleader, the big potato. . . . When you blast that one, the small fry usually quit, I've found."

They moved forward, heading for the town at a sharp trot. Sam shot a glance at his dad's face once. The one-time lobo, a former lawman himself, looked unbelievably calm. Once or twice his lips broke in a faint smile. Then they were at the outskirts and Sam Kilden, with a cry, slammed the spurs to his pony. They tore into the main drag of Saddle. One of Sam's Colts barked and a gunman dragging a girl out the door of a house stumbled, clawing at his back. Another gent, who just came out of a store with a handful of greenbacks, spotted Sam Kilden, bellowed, and crouched on the steps to draw bead.

"Kilden's back! Kilden's—" And

then his scream died. For Boots Kilden had cut over to blast him.

Into the din and turmoil they raced headlong, the guns of the trio snarling and snapping spasmodically. Sam Kilden was vaguely aware of lead denting his hat crown. The cry was travelling up the road. The terrible, dangerous Kilden had returned. A handful of gunmen bunched at the corner of a side street to stop them. The ponies of the trio twisted and curveted. Sam Kilden himself reined to a halt to aim the better.

"They's two Kildens!" somebody screamed through the uproar. "They's two—"

AND then the knot of gun-slicks had melted. Three of them were down and two were fleeing, one of them stumbling with a hit leg. Jim Flowers cursed as a slug nicked him in the flesh of his shoulder, then lifted in the stirrups to chomp down with a smoking weapon at a saddle bum in front of the jailhouse. The trio pressed on, slinging lead, cutting down looters. They bunched under a big eucalyptus once to thumb fresh shells into their guns. Again they tore out.

At the burning bank, some bolder townsmen had organized a bucket brigade to fight the flames. Bart Sweedy had ordered the bank fired so as to destroy that document incriminating him that Jen Redall had deposited there. Sweedy knew the currency could be replaced.

The scum and ragtag were already beginning to flee, to hunt cover as they saw opposition coming. A Sweedy gunman, crouched behind a horse trough, tried for Sam Kilden, got his horse. Sam hit the dust on his shoulders but was up in time to see his father, Boots Kilden, put a slug in the gunman's head. And Boots Kilden dropped from the saddle and ran beside his limping son. They turned into the side road where the *Lucky Lode* was. Gunfire on the main drag had started to fall off. But in the dimness before the shuttered locked up *Lode* dim figures moved. There was a battering sound and somebody was bawling orders.

Sam Kilden was almost killed then as he legged it headlong toward the place he knew Jen would be. Guns spattered lead from heavy shadows. He was sighted and recognized. He stumbled on a break in the uneven plank walk and went flat. Boots Kilden helped him up as he triggered at the advancing gunners. Then the three darted across the street into an alley.

"It's Kilden—by Gawd!" shouted Red Norman from somewhere. "Git him! Git him!"

The three slammed lead from the head of the alley. And then the reckless, wild Sam Kilden charged once more, zigzagging across the road. Two men dropped before him and he had to hurdle the body of one. And Red Norman himself, exposed as the rising moon reached over the tree-tops, came at Sam. He fired. From right behind him, Boots Kilden fired too. Neither father or son ever knew who got Norman and the gunman at his side. And both weapons of both father and son clicked empty at almost the same moment. But the handsome Pretty Jim was right behind them to cover them as they re-loaded.

"Your girl?" Boots Kilden cried hoarsely.

"In there," answered Sam. A couple of men skulked away from the dark front of the *Lode*. A wounded gent sat stupidly on the steps, holding the axe with which he had been attacking the barred doors. Jabbing his hot weapons into the waistband of his pants, Sam Kilden seized the axe and leaped at the door.

"Git in, boy!" yelled Boots. "We'll keep you covered from the street here!"

A FEW more blows and Sam had shattered the upper half of one of the doors. He wormed an arm inside, threw off the bar and found the key to twist in the lock. Then he kicked the door wide and jumped in. Over the bar, a low-turned oil lamp burned. Kilden saw the shadowy figure by the end of the bar counter as he himself threw his guns up level. He was a tiger now, reckoning no

odds, intent only on getting to the woman he loved. And then, as his thumb poised on a trigger, he recognized the figure reeling toward him.

It was the young deputy, Phil Hare, half drunk.

"Boots! Boots—you've come back," Hare sobbed wildly. He half ran toward his former boss. "Boots, it was me betrayed you," Hare babbled. "It was me who let them take Keys from the jail. But—but I didn't know they was going to double-cross you with the dinero! I didn't know. . . . I was locoed." He stood trembling, gun falling from his fingers.

"What?" Kilden gasped. Then: "Where's Jen, you fool?"

Young Hare pawed at his face. "She made me do it, Boots. She made me. I—I was locoed over her. I'd do anything she asked and . . ."

For seconds, Sam Kilden stood rooted as it sank in. He heard the pounding at the back of the place where more Sweedy men were trying to bust in. Was only dimly aware of it.

"Jen—she asked me to do it," Hare sobbed. "And—I did!"

Sam Kilden swayed as if he had been pole-axed between the eyes. The room seemed to shrink up and blacken before his eyes. Terrible realization came. This woman—she was a . . . He couldn't say it, even to himself. But he knew his first reaction to her, the night he had killed Sleeper Keys, had been right. She was evil. He knew then that all Gil Lucian had told him had been true.

Right then, he wished he were dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

III HE FOUND his voice finally. "Where—where is she?" The shaking Hare half turned to point toward the first private room in the hallway of the main floor. Sam Kilden moved across the dance floor. Outside there were scattered shots. A terrible dry sob shook him to the core once. Just as he got down at the door of the first room, a cold draft of air struck him. He peered down the dark hallway. Moonlight flowed through a gap in the back door. And

it was still, very still, out in back there. He waited, knowing Sweedy gunmen were readying to plunge into the place.

Through the thin door beside him came words. He heard Gil Lucian's voice, blubbering:

"I won't do it! I won't, Jen. By Gawd—"

Jen Redall's icy-hard voice bit in on his words. "Yes you will. . . . Run out the back door and across the yard or I'll—"

"They'll kill me! They'll kill me," bleated Gil.

Sam heard the woman's contemptuous laughter. "You coward. . . . Coward. . . . Gil, it's your one chance to live! You've got that dress on and the sun bonnet. And I don't think even Sweedy would shoot down a woman. . . . Get out there—and run and grab a horse! It's your one chance. Do it or I'll—"

Sam Kilden understood the idea. With Gil clothed as a woman, Jen figured they might pursue him and she could make her own escape.

"No!" whined Gil Lucian.

"You go—or you'll die right here," the woman said.

Sam heard a thumping sound as, inside, Gil Lucian went to his knees. There was the sound of a blow and Gil's scream on top of it.

"Go—or die here!"

Desperation steadied Gil's voice. "You murderer! Murderer! You killed my father. . . . You killed that Joyce in the jail. . . . And you tried to have Kilden killed by Al Keys. I know. I know."

"Will you go or do I pull this trigger?"

"You don't dare! Know why? Because I wrote a letter, a letter. See? Give it to a friend. And if I die, that letter'll be sent to Boots Kilden—and he'll come back! Come back to git you and—"

Again Jen laughed at the other side of the door. "I don't dare," she said mockingly. "Yes, I killed your fat fool of a father. And I got rid of that Joyce, too. . . . Yes! And I meant to have Keys kill Boots Kilden but—" She broke off a minute, then went on, colder-voiced than ever.

"So have some sense, Gil. Let that be a warning. I'm not afraid to kill again. Now get out there or—"

"No," sobbed Gil Lucian.

There was the roar of a gun from inside the room at the same instant Sam Kilden saw the rear door swing wide and the first gunman appear.

"Boots!" cried Hare from up by the bar.

KILDEN came around fast, instinct sending him into the gunman's crouch. He saw lanky, pin-headed Bart Sweedy leaping from the stairs of the balcony and turning to throw down on him. Sweedy had slipped in by a back window and gone up the rear stairs. His lips parted in a silent curse.

Then the guns of both men were slicing the dimness with muzzle flame. Sam Kilden's left arm went numb as it was hit. He kept firing with his right weapon. Sweedy glided sideward without volition. His next shot gouged the floor a couple of yards from his own boots. And then he seemed to break in two as Sam Kilden's next bullet crashed a gap in his chest. His wounded leg, hit by Sam the first time, buckled. And, with blood pouring from the mortal hole in his body, Bart Sweedy plunged sideward to fold up against the bar front like a sack.

Sam Kilden wheeled to pour lead at the men coming in the rear. Another pair of guns bucked and snarled at his side. Boots Kilden had raced in to side his son. Two bodies piled up in the back doorway. Then the Sweedy gun-slicks were piling out into the yard. Boots Kilden went down the hall after him. And Sam sucked air once, then slammed himself against the door of the room where Jen Redall was. It broke open.

Inside he straightened, with his hit left arm dangling. Crouched beside a chair like a whipped cur was Gil Lucian, holding his bleeding side. Backed against the curtained window, a .32 levelled, stood Jen Redall. She stood gaping, unbelieving.

"Boots," she finally breathed. She came forward to the wild-eyed man with the powder-smirched face. "Boots . . ."

Gil lifted his head, mouth working as he tried to talk.

Kilden went to him and picked him up and put him in the chair. Ripping open the man's shirt, he saw it was only a surface wound between the ribs. As he turned, Jen's free hand clutched his arm.

"Boots, darling! Darling, you came back for me."

He nodded curtly. "I came back—to get you!" There was a brutal note in his voice.

Fear jumped into her eyes. "Boots, I'll—I'll tell you all about it after we're out of here. Take me away, take me away!" Hysteria tore at her voice. "Boots, I know now, I know I love you! Nothing else counts. We—"

"Don't touch me," he husked.

She stared. "Boots, I love you! I'll be yours. We'll go anywhere. I love you! I have money. We can—"

"We go to the jail first," he said. He flung off her arm and with the same gesture batted the .32 from her trembling hand.

"Jail? J-jail?" she repeated, sobbing. "Boots, you mean you're going to put me—"

Again the curt nod. She half choked.

"Boots, I love you—love you! Once, you said you loved me. And—and I know you did. You can't—"

"I'm a lawman. . . . I heard you confess those killings. Gil here is a witness—and he's going to live. You—you're going to stand trial."

There was a breathless, heavy silence. She tried to throw herself in his arms.

"They'll hang me, Boots! Or send me to prison for—for life," she pleaded. "You—you can't do this to a woman you loved and—"

He holstered his gun and pulled out the handcuffs he had forgotten he carried in his front pocket. He seized her wrists. She swayed against him, her hot lips pressing up to his.

Sam Kilden snapped on the cuffs and led her out the door. He felt like a dead man then. . . .

(Continued On Page 112)



Horse Thief Hero

A Fact Feature

By JUDY ZISSMAN

THE first thing that happened to Ewing Young in the Oregon Territory was his denunciation as a horsethief, by no less a person than Chief Factor McLoughlin of the great Hudson's Bay Company. Strangely enough, when he died ten years later Young was personally responsible for the establishment of law, if not order, in the Territory.

Ewing had been with Kit Carson in California when the glowing description of Oregon offered him by Hall Kelley made him decide to move on north. Kelley was a former Boston schoolteacher who, without ever seeing the Pacific coast, had acquired such a fanatical interest in settling the Oregon country that he had persuaded hundreds of others to go there. But when he tried to make the trip himself, everything went wrong.

After being robbed and deserted by a party of Boston emigrants, Kelley walked half way across the Mexican desert, and wound up in California, where he persuaded Ewing and a few others to make the trip to the Territory with him. Ewing had some horses with him, and so did two other members of the expedition. The other two horse-owners apparently vanished on the way up, because when Young and Kelley got to Fort Vancouver, they found that the information that some of the horses were

stolen had come up ahead of them by sea, and the Chief Factor took them to be the thieves.

Horse-thieves were no more popular in Vancouver in 1832 than they were anywhere in the West at any time. Ewing was given the same reception the settlers would have accorded a rattlesnake, and was trusted just about as far. He escaped lynching only because vigilante committees had not yet been organized. Anyone who came to the Territory with the same reputation a few years after his death couldn't have lived long enough to prove himself right or wrong.

Ewing lived, but he found it hard to make a living. He was under general suspicion, and realizing he had no chance with the law-abiding citizens no matter what he did, he began to make plans for opening a distillery. That turned the trick; the church people around Vancouver felt that there was already a more than plentiful supply of firewater in the neighborhood. They hotfooted it over to Young's place, to make peace with him on condition that he abandon his plans for distilling or selling liquor. Ewing was only too happy to agree.

FROM that time on, the breaks all fell the right way. When William Slacum sent a party down to California to buy cattle and drive the herd back overland to Oregon, Young headed the expedition. The trip was an outstanding success, and was also the beginning of Ewing Young's personal fortune.

By 1841, the erstwhile suspect had accumulated a good deal of property. And then, by the simple act of dying, he succeeded in giving Oregon its first civil government and legal code.

Young died leaving no will, no known heirs, and 600 head of cattle. Someone had to take care of the cattle, so there was nothing to do but elect a judge, clerk, and sheriff, to decide what to do with the estate.

The hurried election had the peculiar result of making Ira Babcock, the first Judge, a virtual dictator,

(CContinued On Page 86)



The Greener

By

FRANKIE-LEE WEED & KELLY MASTERS

For all that he fitted into the West, this geologist fella might have come direct from the moon. But he had guts, and that made up for a lot of loco-stuff!

SOMETIMES you can get to liking a fellow even if he does act loco. You know I must have liked the Greener, or I wouldn't have spent my time riding around through the hot hills with him just watching him pick up little pieces of rock.

That's all we did for three months

—just ride through the heat, over hogbacks and through drywashes all day. Him getting off his pinto and walking along slow, picking up those rocks and putting on his glasses and squinting at them.

He'd either throw the rock away or he'd smile at it and spout the longest danged words, and then open up one of the bags on that pack mule, and lay it in there tender, like it was an egg. Then sometimes when we'd be resting, he'd get out that bow and arrow outfit that he carried over his shoulder and do some shooting. And he could really shoot that danged Injun-musket, too.

After a while you'd get to wondering if he really was a geology fellow or if he was loco, or if maybe they were the same thing. Of course, he paid me to go along to see that he didn't get lost in the hills. And I got to liking him, even if it did look like a fellow that dressed that way couldn't have all the wheels turning just right in his head.

He wore glasses on a silk ribbon, and carried this bow and arrow, and wore those bloomer kind of pants and women's stockings with red around the tops. And we just galivanted around the hills, him picking up rocks and smiling at them. I tell you anybody would think he was loco. Even after you found out how blamed smart he was, you still couldn't help wondering if maybe a fellow like that couldn't be smart and loco at the same time.

I never saw anybody liked to smile like him. He had a mouth like a girl, and when he smiled his mouth didn't do even half of it. It was his eyes. Right through the glasses, if his little ridge of a nose hadn't bucked them off, you could see those round blue eyes. They had something in them. You couldn't tell what it was, but when he looked up at you, it just came right out of his eyes and climbed up over his glasses and said howdy.

Knowing him, I know what happened when he met the Horrels. If you asked him, he'd maybe blush and look down at his shoes and let his glasses slide off and hit the end of

that ribbon. But I wiggled enough of it out of him to piece out the rest.

THAT night there in the cabin he was soaked like all the rest of us, and shivering so bad his quiver of arrows was jiggling. His lips were as blue as a new pair of levis, but they were smiling. Whenever somebody would try to get him to move up to the fire, he'd say, "Thank you, no sir. Thank you. I am quite comfortable, sir. Really—quite comfortable." He always talked funny like that. Maybe it was on account of the big names he called his rocks.

Well, that old cabin had cracks in it you could throw a half-grown calf through. It had been a line rider's shack, and it had been there a long time. The way that wet norther was bucking and rearing against it tonight, you'd figure it wouldn't be there much longer.

Every man in the basin was there. We were all cold from riding through the storm, and we were all hunkered around the rusty old pot-belly. We'd filled her so full of mesquite roots the lid wouldn't shut, and she was red-hot.

Sud Carter stood in front of the pot-belly, cracking his knuckles above it. In the light from it and from a lantern somebody had hung up on a nail, his face looked like sandstone with a lot of little drywashes all over it. We all waited for him to start talking. You see, he was the first one to take up land here in the basin, and when anything comes up we wait for Sud to do the first palaver-ing.

Well, when he got his big knuckles all unjointed, he looked around at all of us, and we quit listening to the norther.

He said, "Men." Then he spit tobacco juice against the pot-belly and watched the steam come up. Then he said again, "Men—the Horrels are back."

He waited til we'd all chewed up a sample of that, then he went on. "I was poppin' some yearlin's out of the brush along the river today, and the Horrels seen me. I'm lucky I didn't tote none of their lead away from there with me."

BART CAHILL was right across from me, and he wanted to know how Sud knows it's the Horrels.

"Ranger Captain Edwards is a friend of mine," Sud said. "Last time I seen him, he told me the Horrels are back in Texas and runnin' loose. Says he's had so many reports about where they are, he's quit tryin' to run down the reports. He figgered though they might land back at their old stompin' grounds here in the basin. Said for me to send word in to him if they showed up."

"Well, why don't we send word?" I asked.

"That's just it," Sud said. "They've got the pass plugged up, and they're holed up in the old Merton house. And I figger they don't aim to let none of us get out of this basin until they've rounded up all of our stock and are on their way to the border with 'em."

Lafe Southerland was there by Bart. He said, "Why don't we go gun it out with 'em?"

"No," Sud said. "No—mebbe that ain't the way."

Lafe said, "The hell it ain't."

I said, "I'm with Sud." "Them Horrels is gunslingers. There's enough of us that we might best 'em in a shoot-out all right, but there'll be plenty widows and orphans in this here valley when the smoke blows away if we go tryin' it."

Drew Morton was standing next to me. He stomped his feet on the sod floor a couple of times and then threw his loop in.

"I come here to the basin," he said, "like the rest of you done; I come here to live. I could of died where I was at. If there's goin' to be any lead-swappin' with them Horrels, I don't aim to watch the doin's through a spyglass. But like Sud here—I favor gettin' word to the rangers without no killin'."

We all listened to the rain pawing at the shack, and the wind yanking at it, and Sud spit again. He fingered some scrapings out of the side pocket of that Injun-blanket coat of his, and filled up his pipe. Then he stuck a piece of mesquite root in the

fire and took him a light. Sud always chews and smokes at the same time.

"That's just it again," he said, and then he puffed a couple of times on his pipe. "Gettin' word through to the Rangers with them owlhoots keepin' the gap plugged up."

"We got to gun it out," Bart said. "Can't none of us get through, not with them Horrels on the lookout. It'll come to lead-slingin' anyhow, so might as well be first as last, I says."

I looked across the pot-belly and here came the Greener, squirming through between Lafe and Rusty Horn. And then he was right there, looking up at Sud. He had on that gray leather Injun-looking jacket and those bloomers. His glasses slid off, and his eyes were round and shining and looking up at Sud, dancing all over hell.

SUD looked down at the little Greener like he was a new colt the old mare had had during the night, and like he'd just now found him in the barn next morning. The Greener's skinny neck was stretched up, looking at Sud, and his Adam's apple jiggled a couple of times, and he tried to say something. Then his teeth got to clattering, and he had to quit.

Everybody was grinning at him now, all but Sud. They all liked the Greener. He'd made a bow and arrow layout for every kid in the valley, and they could all shoot them, too.

Sud kept looking down at the Greener. Finally the little fellow got his words going.

"Pardon me, Mr. Carter," he said. "I do not wish to appear obtrusive, but may I inquire what is troubling you gentlemen?"

Sud looked like he was trying to figure that out. He took another squirt-shot at the pot-belly, and the Greener watched, and looked like he thought Sud's spitting was something fine.

Everybody has got used to explaining things to the Greener. He's always asking, and when you explain he always looks like he's tickled to death about finding out. And you know all the time that whatever it is,

it don't amount to a damn, but the Greener likes to learn about everything. And the way he looks so blamed happy that way, makes you want to keep right on telling him things.

Sud started talking to the Greener now like you would teaching a young bird dog to point.

"Them Horrels," Sud said, "they killed a feller four years ago and skunt out. Now they're back. They're headin' up a whole slug of gun-hands, and they'll six-gun the feller that tries to get through the pass with word to the Rangers."

"Outlaws," the Greener said.

His eyes looked like blue marbles, and he got to hunting for his spectacle ribbon, looking awful tickled.

Sud said, "Yeah."

"Continue," said Greener.

Sud looked foolish and put his pipe away and freshed up his chew and warmed his hands.

"Well, that's all, Son," he said. "Unless we can get word to them Rangers, we'll have to gun it out with 'em. Bart's right, likely—we'll have to gun it out anyhow."

The Greener really started palaverin' then, his smoothest.

"If you gentlemen have no objection," he said, "I should be honored to take your message to the Rangers. These outlaws, the Horrels, will never suspect me of being one of you ranchers, and they will not detain me when I express my desire to journey through the gap."

Well, the little tenderfoot had us when he said that. There wasn't a one of us could say a danged word. We just listened to the norther ranting outside. And then somebody stomped their feet to warm them, and somebody else crammed some more mesquite root into the pot-belly.

 SUD just stood there looking at the Greener's tickled face. Then he looked at the yellow rain hat the Greener had pushed back on his head. There was a pretty curl of honey-colored hair out from under the hat, sticking to his forehead. Sud kept looking at him, and the Greener's glasses slid off, and when that hap-

pened he looked like he was afraid Sud was going to spank him.

Somebody laughed out loud then, and the rest of us couldn't hold back. We all laughed. The Greener didn't pay any mind. He just kept looking at Sud, and Sud wasn't laughing.

Sud looked around at all of us. "Why not?" he said.

We all quit laughing and looked at him. He looked at all of us again. And he said the same thing again.

"Why not?" he said.

The Greener was sure tickled now. He looked around at all of us, just like Sud.

He said, "May I reiterate—why not?"

There wasn't a one of us knew what that middle word meant, but we knew he was sure honing for the job.

"You gentlemen all have homes and families," the Greener was saying. "I have none."

I got to wondering what the heck to do with all of those rocks of his if Sud did let him go.

"Mean that, Sud?" said Hogjaw Lander.

"If they's anybody could fool them Horrels wouldn't it be him?" Sud said. "Let 'em get one look at any of us, and we'll have to try to hot-lead it out of the gap—but him—mebbe he could say—well, somethin'—"

"He could say he's just travelin' through," said Lafe.

I said, "Yeah. Mebbe on his way to join up with a tribe of Injuns in Arizony."

That wasn't a danged bit funny when I looked over at the Greener and saw how sad it made his face; I sure wished I hadn't said it. But then right away he was smiling again, and he said, "Please do not feel concern over my safety, gentlemen," the Greener said.

He sure was getting happier every minute. Now he was pulling his rain hat down to cover up that curl, and he was buttoning up his jacket.

"I am ready, gentlemen," he said. "I shall depart immediately."

"Hell," said Bart. "S'pose he does get through? The Ranger Captain

won't never believe what he tells. It'll be just another report comin' through 'bout the Horrels."

"That's right," Sud said.

"If you will write a message," said the Greener, "Mr. Carter sir, to your friend, the Ranger Captain, I shall deliver it to him in person, and with the utmost promptness. He will put credence in information delivered to him in your handwriting, sir."

Sud puzzled that one out. Then he said, "That's right, Son," he said. "It won't take me but a shake."

Well, Sud penciled a note on a piece out of the Greener's little notebook that he wrote the names of his rocks down in. Then the Greener handed me the notebook so the Horrels wouldn't get it.

"Please keep it until I return," he said to me.

I got to wondering again what to do with those rocks.

THE rain was raw-hiding us plenty when we went outside. All of us went. We took the lantern and went out to where the Greener had tied his little pinto.

The pony had the prettiest danged tail and mane I ever saw. The Greener had rolled that note up tight, littler than a pencil. Now he pulled a hair out of the pinto's mane, and tied it around the note tight. He looked around at Sud and smiled nice, and then he lifted up the pinto's mane and tied the note up under it. Right then I swore if I ever again accused the Greener of being loco, I'd blow my danged brains out.

The rain was slacking off, and the Greener wiped some of the water off his saddle with his hand and stepped up onto his pony. He put his glasses on and looked at us. His glasses got so wet he couldn't see through them, so his nose bucked them off. He was the happiest little fellow I ever saw.

"I shall return soon," he said.

He whistled to the pinto, and that pony jumped like he'd been touched with a branding iron, and was gone.

Somebody said, "I ain't bettin' on that."

Nobody else said anything, and we all went back to the shack, and I was

wishing I wouldn't keep thinking about those blasted rocks.

Sud said, "We might as well all go home. Won't know til tomorrow night whether he made it or not."

* * *

YOU know how it is after a wet norther. The sunshine is hard and cold and white smashing against the rocks that are still wet, and it goes spreading all out up over the hills, and real bright on the ridges, and not so bright where there are trees. It was like that the next morning. The sun and all, I mean. And the wind was still kicking down out of the Panhandle, and it was as sharp as a Bowie knife, too.

The skinny little Greener rode along with his little back humped, and the wind pushing against it. His bow was over his shoulder, strung up, and he was whistling through his teeth, gay. Whistling like it wasn't cold or anything, just like he was riding along for fun. He didn't have his glasses on, but they were hanging there, bumping against his jacket.

The sunshine was down deep in his eyes, and you'd had to have been out rock-picking with him a long time to know those eyes weren't missing one danged clump of buck-brush or one boulder or tree trunk along that river trail.

The trail and the river went right along together there. There was a ford right there at the gap where the trail went up through the cut, and at the ford was that old house where the Horrels had holed up.

Of course they'd have lookouts. Well, the Greener went right on riding along, innocent, with his pretty little rain hat on his curls, whistling, riding right into that nest of the dangedest string of lead-slinging Colt-hands that ever sat a saddle. And knowing it.

Well, there he was, riding and whistling, and here came that flat-muscled, black-whiskered hombre stepping out of the brush by the trail, looking at him through the sights of

a Winchester. You'd have thought the Greener was downright tickled.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

He put on that smile and got his glasses forked on his nose. "Is not the sun a welcome old fellow after last night's deluge?" he said.

Well, that big Horrel jasper had the hammer back on that Winchester, but he quit looking through the sights now, and let the rifle down into the bend of his arm and just looked.

The Greener's glasses slid off, and he let his weight go into his left stirrup and kept smiling.

Black Whiskers said, "I'll be damned," and just kept on looking.

By now there were cold-eyed, gun-hung hombres coming from everywhere.

"Git down," Whiskers said.

The Greener said, "Thank you."

Another ranny came up with his rifle handy. "Who the hell's this?" he said.

There were more Horrels coming.

Whiskers said, "Yeah. Who are yuh?" Said this to the Greener.

The Greener was on the ground now, and those other killers were all getting to him. They all got to looking at the bloomers and the women's stockings, and they kept looking, and none of them seemed like they could say a danged word.

The Greener was busy saying "Good morning" to all of them when Whiskers yelled at him, "Who the hell are you?"

THE Greener was smiling beautiful with the sun dancing in his eyes, and he said, proud, he said, "Gentlemen, I have not divulged my name to anyone for three months."

"Why not?"

"In every Western locality I have visited," the Greener said, "no one asks my name. They say, 'Hey, look at the Greener!' Thereafter, all individuals address me as the Greener. Yes, yes. And again—yes."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Whiskers. Then he swelled up and got mad. "Today is when you do talk!" he yelled, and his big hand

landed right across the little Greener's mouth.

The Greener just looked up at Whiskers and took a white handkerchief out of his pocket and caught the blood that was running down his chin. The whole outfit was laughing, and somebody yelled, "Take him acrosst yore knee, Slick!"

Another one said, "Wonder if it's a mare colt or a stud!"

"Purty little pilgrim come to play Injun," another one yipped.

Whiskers jerked the Greener around and grabbed his quiver and bow.

"What's these?" he said.

The Greener quit dabbing at his busted mouth.

"I," he said, smiling, "am an archer."

"To hell with that," Whiskers said. "Where yuh from, where yuh headin' for, and who are yuh?"

The Greener was getting happy now because he had a bunch of questions to answer.

"I, gentlemen," he said, "am riding through this valley in search of specimens. Dover, Delaware is the site of my birth, and I am now undertaking an extensive tour of the Western states in the interest of Science. I am a geologist."

All of those hardcases except Whiskers started laughing. Whiskers yelled, "Shut up!" Then he yelled at the Greener. "What are yuh?"

"A geologist, really," the Greener said, and he's sure talking a dainty now.

"What's that?" Whiskers bellowed.

The Greener got to looking awful patient, and his eyes were jumping. "Geology, gentlemen," he said, "is the science that investigates the structure of the earth, the successive physical changes it has undergone, and the causes which have been produced by such changes."

You never saw a fellow know as many words as that little Greener. There's no telling where he would have stopped if Whiskers hadn't slapped him across the mouth again.

"Shut up!" Whiskers yelled. "Are them jaspers in the valley sendin'

you out of here with word to the law about us?"

The Greener had his handkerchief against his mouth again, and he was looking right white.

"I am not acquainted with you gentlemen," he said, "and I pledge you my word that I shall speak to no one of your presence here."

He said all of that through that white handkerchief that had his blood on it.

One of the hombres had the bow and arrows now. He said to Whiskers, "Hell," he said, "this pilgrim's as harmless as a pup with a gut-ache." Then he said to the Greener, "Kin yuh shoot this thing?"

The Greener said, "Oh yes, sir." He folded up his handkerchief neat and put it in his pocket.

Whiskers said, "Le's see yuh."

The Greener said, "Certainly."

He took the bow and the prettiest arrow, a shiny one with yellow feathers on it. There was a crow coming with the wind right down the river, low, and somebody said, "Le's see yuh pick him down."

The Greener smiled and said, "Yes, sir."

He got his outfit all fixed up. The crow was flying right over the ford. The crow was right there. The Greener out loose.

JUST as quick as you could see his arrow, it was out of sight, and that crow kept going, and he was cawing as he went. Right then, when they could all see that the Greener had missed, Whiskers' Winchester went off, and the crow was rolling over and over and coming down into the river, leaving a lot of his feathers up there in the wind.

They were all laughing at the Greener, and he was looking awful sorry, and then he quit looking sorry and looked happy because Whiskers had hit the crow.

"You are wonderful, sir," he said to Whiskers. He was looking like he was awful proud of Whiskers, and he said, "Really you are. You are phenominal."

Whiskers said, "The hell with it."

Then he said to his men, "Look him over and let him go."

Well, they looked him over, all right. Stripped him right down. Left him standing there in that north wind with nothing on but his glasses and goose pimples. They all looked at him there and said, "Damn, if he ain't a hell of a man." Then they went through his duds. When he was shaking with the cold hard enough to fly to pieces, they gave him back his duds, and Whiskers said, "The pinto, Limpy."

The Limpy hombre started working on the saddle and the bedroll. Another one yanked out his knife and whacked that pretty long tail and mane off of that pony. The Greener couldn't stand to watch. He just kept looking at his stockings he was pulling on.

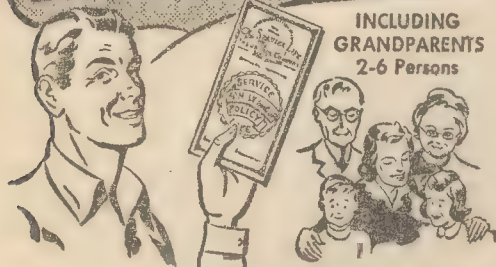
The hombre looked all through the hair of the pinto's mane and tail. There couldn't have been a toothpick left. He didn't miss a thing. Then they histed the Greener onto that bare pony, and Whiskers gave the pony a kick and yelled, "Git the hell out!"

The Greener didn't have a saddle or bedroll or bow and arrow or anything. The pinto had a bridle, and that was all. The Greener looked back at that pinto's stub tail and looked like he wanted to bawl.

Riding across the ford and up the trail through the cut, he kept rubbing the neck where the mane had been. At the top of the cut, he slid down to the ground and picked up that pretty arrow with the yellow feathers that he'd shot at the crow. It was kind of pitiful, him having only that much left out of his pretty shooting outfit that he liked so well. The pinto had kept walking right along, and then the Greener was on his back again, and the pinto was still walking. When they were through the cut, the Greener laid down flat on that bot-tailed pinto and whistled to him.

OF COURSE, the Greener never would tell you all of this, but like I said I knew about how it was there with the Horrels from what I

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was able to get out of him. I knew him pretty good from all those months watching him pick up rocks.

Edwards, the Ranger Captain, told me about it later. He said the Greener was flat on the pony like that when he rode up to the Ranger office. The pinto was all lathered up like he was ready for a shave.

The Greener slid off and walked in and said, "How do you do, sir."

He had that arrow with the yellow feathers in his hand. The arrow he'd shot at that crow, that he'd picked up. Edwards says the Greener just broke that arrow in two, and it was hollow. He pulled a rolled up piece of paper out of it that was tied up with a horse hair.

He handed it over, and he said, "Captain, can you recommend a restaurant where I can get a cup of hot coffee?"

The captain told him where the chuck house was.

The Greener said, "Thank you kindly, sir."

He walked outside and forked his glasses on his nose and looked at the pinto's bare tail. Then he went to the other end of the pinto and led him off down the street, going to the chuck house, and he was smiling, and his glasses were still on him, and his eyes were smiling through his glasses.

(THE END)

HORSE THIEF HERO

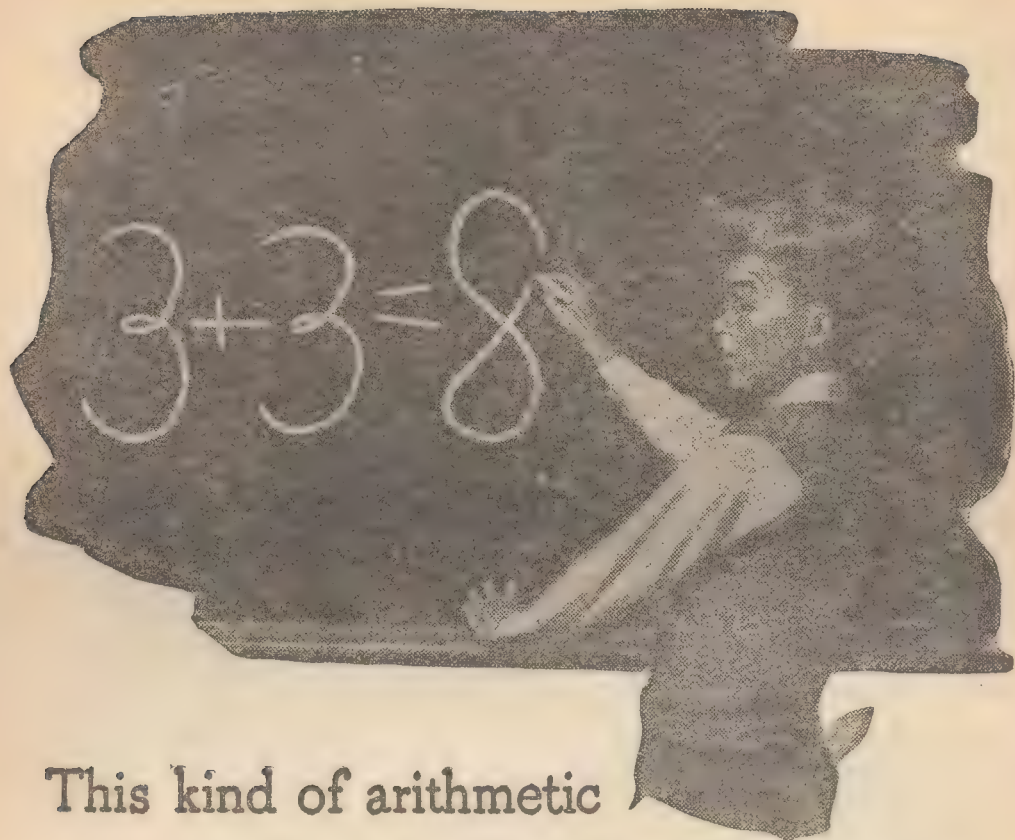
(Continued From Page 78)

since he was instructed to act according to the laws of New York. For ten years there was no copy of the laws of New York in Oregon, and what Babcock did not remember, he was forced to make up.

The last ironical twist of fate in the Case of Ewing Young was the erection of the first public building. The building was a jail, and the funds for its construction were taken from the estate of the "horsethief," who had missed being imprisoned himself only because the jail wasn't yet built.

(THE END)





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Dead Man's Boots

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

"Charlie Wrenn has it in for me, Donnel. He won't just shoot me clean; he'll carve me up with his knife. So you're going to swap clothes with me and ride out of here—take your chances on getting away—or you're going to be gut-shot right here and now!"



THE RAIN rifled down on his huddled shoulders, wormed inside his wind-flapped slicker, cascaded from the brim of his sombrero when he shifted his head. The hoofs of his pony struggled in viscous mud, splashed through puddles, slid wearily on rain-slicked hardpan. Every so often a spasmodic gust of wind would fling a sheet of almost solid water full in his teeth, forcing shut his gray slashes of eyes. His wide mouth pressed into a seam of determination. Then he shook his big shaggy head. For himself, he could have pushed on through the night, reached Gunstock County by dawn,

and ridden on up Milk Creek to his ranch and Beth. But the paint horse between his legs was boogered down from the heavy going already, and Mort Donnel was not one to punish an animal, badly as he wanted to get home.

As he came out of the little gulch, the rain over the range thinned momentarily. Through the blurred night he caught the faint flicker of a light off to the left. Donnel veered the paint toward it. Twice it was lost as he dropped into hollows between higher swells of the prairie. Then he rounded a stand of trees and made out the small ranch-house a few hundred

yards ahead. Lightning flickered over the wet night and he saw it was a paint-peeling, tumble-down place with a small saddle-backing barn behind it, a little dobie bunkhouse with its roof fallen in at one corner down from that. Plainly one of those two-bit, one-man cow outfits with some poor determined devil bucking drought and a mortgage and whatever else. Fate might throw at him in an attempt to get a start at building a brand. There would be shelter for the horse, a place for him to catch a few hours of shuteye and dry out his clothes. But he was impatient to get home.

"I've got to git things settled with that danged Hutch Berry," he muttered half aloud as he realized the rain was dying, the wind growing stronger.

The lightning flickered again, a livid glow mushrooming over the prairie, pulsating, holding for several seconds. Off to the west, Donnel picked out a bunch of cow critters huddled in the lee of a low bluff, and atop the bluff he thought he glimpsed a band of riders. But he couldn't be sure before the glaring white light was gone. Their presence seemed unimportant anyway.

He dropped down a cutbank into a little road before the house. His hand went inside his slicker and cowhide jacket and under his shirt to check that money belt lashed around his middle. He was on his way home from the shipping point where he had sold his little herd and given their time to the two hands who had driven it down with him. The proceeds would retire the last note the bank held. And—he cursed under his breath—pay Deputy Hutch Berry for a few more months of silence.

DONNEL looked up the slight grade of the ranchyard at the house a moment. It seemed a little strange. No light showed from it now, and he had the odd sensation of being watched. His left hand jumped down to kick back the skirt of his slick and snap up to the bone-handled Colts on his thigh. Then he relaxed, angry at himself for having reverted to an old

habit. He knew it was because he had been thinking of Berry. He would have liked Berry to force him into killing him. With Hutch Berry six feet under, his own past would be buried.

Because Berry knew that once he had been a gun-runner down on the Rio. That was several years back, before he had married and settled down. What Berry didn't know was that, just a wild-headed button then, he had gone into the business to try to save his dad's outfit. Not that it would have made any difference to the greedy Ovaro deputy if he had known. After his dad had died, wiped out, young Donnel had quit the game and gone straight. But Berry had recognized him, had remembered him as Blackie Donnelly, the name he had used down on the Rio. And Berry knew about the gun battle that July night between the bunch Donnel had ridden with and the marshals. A U. S. marshal had been fatally wounded in that ruckus. If a man were now revealed to have been a member of that bunch, he would face serious charges. So Mort Donnel was bribing Berry, deputy to the Gunstock County sheriff, for his silence. And outside of the cost, the struggling young rancher loathed himself for doing it.

Wondering what made him think of Hutch Berry then, he cut off his meditation and spurred through the broken-down gate up the yard to the front of the house. Twice he sang out and got no answer on the dripping night. It seemed peculiar after seeing that light a few minutes before. Without further ado, he rounded the house and went on back to the barn. It was padlocked. But a little over from it was a three-sided shed. Leaving his weary cayuse there after stripping the saddle from its back, he strode back to the house and went up the sagging front steps. Now, the rain had ceased entirely but it was rapidly turning colder.

Twice he hammered sharply on the door, then applied his boot to it. From the tail of his eye he saw the blanket, covering the inside of one of the front windows, twitch. Again his left hand levered to his gun and the thick

shoulders of his strapping body hunched up for action. The wind broke off suddenly.

From inside, Donnel caught a hoarse whisper. "Let him in. Let him in. He's all right."

Then there was the grate of a bar being lifted behind the door. It creaked open and lamplight spilled through the gap, half blinding the cowman. He glimpsed the scared taut face of a sawed-off middle-aged man.

"Come in, come in, quick," the man said nervously.

Work-calloused hand still curled around the butt of his holstered hogleg, Donnel stepped in, eyes cutting about the small dingy room. Came back to the low-turned lamp with the chipped chimney that guttered on the table in the center. Then he galvanized as he recognized the man slouched in the chair by the back end of the table. He was just putting his drawn Colts down on the table, grinning in that half-sneering way at Mort Donnel.

It was Hutch Berry, the blackmailing deputy. . . .

WELL, well, if it ain't Mort Donnel himself! Ain't nobody I'd rather see right now, Donnel," Berry greeted him in that sarcastic drawl of his. "Come right in an' squat. Have yourself a drink an' chase the chill outa your bones, friend!"

Shoving his gun further away, he thumbed at the jug on the other side of the lamp. He was a slouching hulk of a man, the same height as Donnel but not as square-shouldered. Both were black-headed. But Berry's hair came to within a scant inch and a half of his beetling brows. Beneath them, flanking a broken nose, a pair of shrewd sly eyes peeked from caves. The stamp of the bully was plain on him, that and deep conceit.

"Put your britches in a chair, Donnel. Hell of a night, ain't it," he added in that drawl Donnel found so irritating.

Mort Donnel's hand came away from his holster top and he slid out of his old slicker, yanked off the dripping Stetson. He was thinking,

Think of the devil and you'll see his tail. It was a surprise to run into Berry over here in the McKinley country. And Mort Donnel was suspicious; Berry, for him, was being too damn nice.

"What're you doing over here in McKinley County, Berry?" Donnel asked.

"Dogging down a dang hoss thief," the deputy said readily. "Didn't catch him though." He shifted to lift himself out of the chair slowly, heavy-featured face set against pain. Limping on his left leg, he moved to one of the two front windows. He had been wounded. Donnel saw bloodstains on his riding breeches and the bandage inside a rent in them.

"Rain's stopped," Berry said with an exultant note. "And they's a moon breaking through. We can see anybody coming now and—Manning, take a look out the back," he ordered the middle-aged owner of the two-bit outfit. And the man clumped off obediently into the kitchen.

"Some trouble?" asked Mort Donnel.

"Oh, you know, a John Law never knows when some coyote will try to sneak in for a lucky shot, Donnelly." He smirked as Mort Donnel's face jerked at the use of the handle he had worked under in his outlaw days. "And I got a tip that hossthief has some friends over this way." He sat down again.

THERE was something wrong; Donnel knew it. He gave up all ideas about turning in and catching some shuteye. Manning came back to report nobody nosing around in the rear of the place. The deputy poured himself a drink from the jug, gulped it down, belched.

"I'm expecting a little visit from you right soon, Donnel," he said with a knowing wink. "A deputy has some right heavy expenses, ya know. Met a little dancehall hussy over to Delman Forks. . . ." He chuckled.

Mort Donnel's big hands fisted on his lap. This damn blood-sucker, bragging about how he threw his money around on hussies, rubbing it in his face. And his own wife, Beth, made

her own simple calico dresses and did all the work without help in their ranch-house because they were pinched for money themselves. It put the killing urge in a man. Donnel cut his lidded eyes to Manning who fidgeted nervously on a stool over by the stairs. Manning was a scared jasper, sitting on pins and needles.

Mort Donnel's anger-inflamed brain was clicking furiously, framing a design of violence. *If something would only take this Manning out of the room, he could kill Hutch Berry. Shoot him right where he sat, then light out and hit the saddle. A dog like Berry deserves no better than that. Nobody knew he was over in these parts. And he was certain the vague-eyed fear-fraught Manning had failed to catch his name. If he would only go out for a couple of minutes and—*

Manning lifted his graying head, looked at Donnel, and said, "Mister—uh—well, mebbe I could make you a pot of hot java. Sorta warm you up, huh?" And when Donnel, insides quivering like a taut-stretched wire, nodded, the rancher went out to the kitchen once more.

There was a clatter as he chucked some wood into the sheet iron stove, then put the coffee pot on. Donnel had rolled a quirkly. The match shook in his suddenly unsteady fingers as he applied it to the paper tube. His left hand, on the side away from Berry, inched down toward the holster. Again Berry hoisted himself from the chair, sucking his breath audibly against the pain of the leg.

"Don't think no two-bit of a hoss-thief put this lead in me," he snorted, his conceit forcing him to explain. "I run into some of the Charlie Wrenn outfit up by Skull Creek. There was eight-nine of 'em so I had to take a runout." He limped over to the window, pulling aside the blanket for another looksee.

DONNEL had his Colts out and pressed against the side of his thigh. He brought it up clear, strong thumb started to ear back the trigger. Then he lowered the weapon again. Polecat though Hutch Berry was, Donnel couldn't drill him through the

back. Then the deputy turned and Donnel saw he had drawn a weapon from a shoulder rig as he peered out into the moon-painted night. Berry came walking back.

"What's wrong here anyways?" Donnel demanded suddenly. "You act like you expected—"

Back in the kitchen, Manning's boots made quick sounds. "Hey, Berry! Berry, somebody's moving down 'side the barn," he called tensely.

Berry swore under his breath and hobbled quickly into the kitchen, knocking his cream-hued sombrero from the back of a chair. The light in the kitchen was doused. The next moment, the deputy's gun rattled out two staccato coughs. Donnel ran over to the kitchen door. Big Berry had ripped the rude burlap shade from the small back window and shattered its panes by firing through them. Looking past his head, out in the moonlit night he saw a running figure darting behind the little sagging corral. Several riders appeared from around the corner of the vacant bunkhouse and slammed lead at the back of the main house. *Thwack—thwack—thwack*, the slugs bit into the kitchen wall, one tearing through to ricochet off the sheet-iron stove.

"The Wrenn Bunch!" Berry panted, half to himself, as he limped hurriedly from the kitchen toward a window at the front again. "If my damn cayuse hadn't broken its leg in that gully and I hadn't had to shoot it. . . They found the hoss. . . knew I couldn't go far on foot. . . hit for the nearest house. . . Now they got me—got me, the damn—" He launched a stream of obscene invectives of which he had a fine command, peering out at the ranchyard.

Again his .45 snarled out. There was a cry of pain outside. "Got that sonuva—nicked him, anyways," Berry gloated briefly.

Mort Donnel was already shifting over to take his station at the second front window. He knew about the Charlie Wrenn lobo outfit. They operated out of this valley, with headquarters close to Minton, a rough salty pueblo over to the west, according to the rumors. They were a hard-

drinking hard-fighting bunch who made it a rule never to molest anybody in the vicinity of Minton. In return, Minton didn't bother them. Charlie Wrenn himself walked the streets of the town openly, recognized, without any gun guard.

"Wrenn'll cut me to ribbons afore he kills me," Berry muttered, talking half to himself. "Him and his damn knife. . ."

CHARLIE WRENN'S temper was a legend in that end of the state, Donnel knew. He was a tall wiry man who laughed at danger and was a great hand with the ladies, soft-spoken and gallant. But let him think he had been wronged or that somebody had tricked him and he was a merciless wolf of a man, a raging killer who thought a bullet was too quick a death for his foe. He was known, on more than one occasion, after he had captured his enemy, to go to work on him with a knife. And they said Charlie Wrenn was as good a knife-fighter as any man born below the Rio.

"And Hutch Berry is afraid of him—'s afraid of the payoff," Donnel said to himself. "That's danged peculiar and—"

In the rear, Manning's gun spat-tered wildly. Berry's weapon went *crang* through the front window and his chuckle followed on the dying report. "Didn't expect to find so many uh us here an'—"

Donnel's weapon crackled into life as he threw down on some figures ducking along behind the brush by the corner of the ranchyard fence. Crouched, they beat a fast retreat. Though he hated Hutch Berry, Donnel instinctively sided the Law. As the firing broke off, he thumbed fresh shells into his smoke-leaking Colts. There were cautious creeping foot-steps behind him.

He swung in time to see Manning the owner skulking for the stairs, rubbing at the blood on a gray cheek where a bullet had nicked him. He jumped up then like a hunted animal. Berry looked over his shoulder and bawled at him.

"I ain't a-going to git killed!" Man-

ning snarled back and ran up faster, not stopping even when Berry threatened him with his gun. A moment later, a door above slammed and a key scraped in its lock.

Even as Berry, sweating now though it was chilly in the place, started to swear, a yell outside interrupted him.

"Better come out, Berry, you double-crossin' snake! If you do—now—it'll be easier fer you an'—"

"Go ta hell!" Hutch Berry yelled through a broken window pane.

"Come now, Berry, or we'll smoke you out later! That's a promise! An' if we have to burn down an innercent man's place—I'll take it outa your carcass, ya—"

Hutch Berry's two guns fanged lead onto the night venomously. And when the staccato chant of them fell off, the mocking laugh of hidden Charlie Wrenn came across the night.

"All right, Berry. . . Just wait a spell," he yelled.

DONNEL, from his window, watched the big deputy's face work. Saw him step back with fear dragging down his lower jaw. Saw cowardice lick up in the backs of his deep-set eyeballs. Berry looked over at Mort Donnel and forced up a glare.

"They're a-going to wait till dawn—when the moon goes. An' when the ground mist seeps up as a cover for 'em. Then they'll belly in an' fire the place," Berry said. He wetted his thick lips. "They hate me 'cause years ago I—uh—I killed one of the bunch."

"That so?" said Donnel, knowing it was a lie concocted on the spur of the moment. He felt strangely calm though his own hide was in a heap of danger. He saw Berry going weak.

Berry covered his fear by issuing an order. "Git in the back an' see if any of 'em are sneaking in!" he barked.

Back in the kitchen, Donnel studied the dripping moon-painted landscape for some minutes. Once, beyond the bunkhouse and out of shotgun range, he saw a figure stir in the shadows beneath a lone pine. Berry had figured it correctly. They were laying back, waiting for the mist that would

accompany daybreak. Donnel turned to go back into the front room. As he entered it, he couldn't see Berry. And then the hard circular muzzle of a gun banged against his ribs and Hutch Berry spoke from the shadows at one side of the doorway.

"Freeze, Donnel!" His other hand shot out to seize the barrel of Donnel's Colts and bend it down.

"Are you locoed, Berry?" Donnel asked. It didn't make any sense. "What in tarnation's the idee?"

"Not so locoed, Donnel." Hutch Berry's mouth was twisted up in that triumphant smirk. "No-o. 'Cause you're riding. You're putting on my white hat and hitting the saddle. . ."

"What?"

"Yep. You're going to lead Wrenn and his pack on a wild goose chase, Donnel, my friend. You can ride—and mebbe live. Or—you can die right smack here. Sabe?" And raw murder looked out of his flickering eyes. . .

* * *

DONNEL tried to reason, but Deputy Hutch Berry was beyond reasoning. The corrosive acid of naked fear had bitten into his mind. All he knew, all he was capable of thinking of, was that somehow he had to escape from Charlie Wrenn. And another man's life meant nothing in the balance as against his own. Donnel read those things in Berry's twitching face with its vicious mouth ripped back jaggedly.

Donnel said calmly, "Billing me won't save you, Hutch. It won't git you out of here. Together mebbe, we—"

Berry swore hoarsely, laughed a little with an ugly note. "You ain't going to die if you can help it, Donnel." He stuck Donnel's Colts in a side pocket of his coat and reached for his white sombrero on the chair. "So put this on, my friend, and—"

Donnel lounged back against the doorway, shaking his head. "Ain't going, Hutch. . . So you might as well pull that trigger."

Again Berry's lips pared back from his teeth in the mocking grin. "Who're you fooling, Donnel? You

got a sweet little woman waitin' for you back in Gunshot. Yeah. . . Why you dirty yella dog, are you going to abandon her? Ain't you got the nerve to try to git back to her alive?"

Donnel had gone ashen, deep lines bracketing his mouth, at mention of his wife. He knew he was whipped. But he tried to bluff, tried to argue with Hutch Berry. Berry only stood smirking, finally pushed the sombrero at him again.

"Git riding, Donnel!" the deputy snapped. "An' ride like hell. 'Cause I'm telling you—that Wrenn had a personal grudge agin me! He'd blast me in my tracks afore I could spit out a word! An' you're goin' to be me. . . So ride for your life, Donnel. Mebbe you'll git away. Yeah. Mebbe." He chuckled again, figuring how he would get away, grabbing a horse from the barn after the Wrenn pack took out after Mort Donnel.

Slowly Donnel drew on the rain-spotted white Stetson, a little tight for him. Putting the table between them, Berry snapped all but one shell from Donnel's gun. "I'll give you the pistol when you go out the back."

A couple of minutes later, the deputy was letting Mort Donnel out the rear. He shoved the weapon at him, still keeping him covered with his own big blue-black gun. Pointed to the shadows thrown by a thin line of trees running up not far from the horse shed. "Ride hard," he whispered.

DONNEL'S slivered-up eyes scoured Berry's face a moment as if he wanted to remember it forever. But he wasted no breath in threats. That was the bitterest part of it. Even if by some miracle he should get through and escape, Hutch Berry always held that other thing over him. Grabbing the gun he turned and moved along beneath the trees. Moonlight fingered his shoulder once and he moved faster, the breath suddenly hot in his throat. He glanced back hurriedly at the house. He hadn't heard the back door grate closed but it seemed shut.

(Continued On Page 96)

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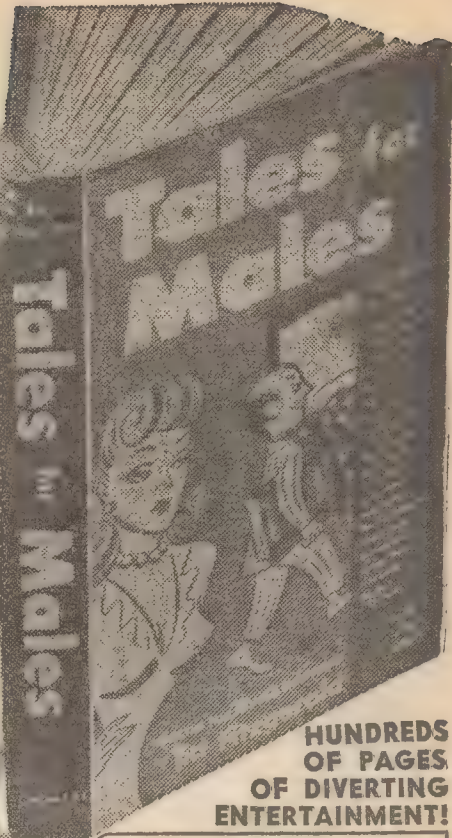
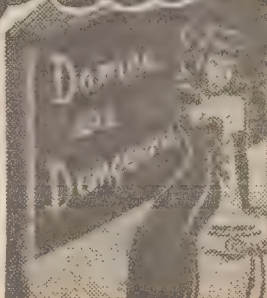
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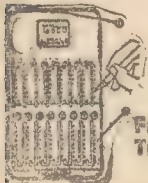
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 94)

Then he got his idea. He wouldn't flee, not far. He would turn and surrender and identify himself. Then Berry would be trapped; that was the answer.

As he slid inside the shed he thought he saw a shadow jump over by the corral. Then he was swinging the saddle onto his pony, clinching the girth strap. Something like a twig snapped some distance away. Donnel turned the horse from the shed. He'd ride a few hundred yards, beyond gun range of the ranch-house, then rein up and hoist his hands in surrender. Charlie Wrenn would know he wasn't Berry all right. He shoved a foot into the stirrup and had the pony running even before he landed in the kak. Bent low over the horn, he raced away from the rear of the place, not even drawing the Colts he had reloaded fully from his cartridge belt inside the shed.

There was a bellow. A shot as a man leaped out of the high grass and ran for a ponyground anchored behind a broken-down wagon. Another bullet whined over Donnel's head. He half turned to see a rider spurring in hard from his right and a little behind. A third gun crackled from the line of trees by the horseshed. That gun belonged to Hutch Berry who had crept out behind Donnel.

The man coming in from the right careened in the saddle, reined in, and slid to the ground, hit in the shoulder. Wrenn men came busting around one side of the house. There was a roar of rage and redoubled firing at the sight of one of their own wounded. Mort Donnel threw the spur steel to his cayuse afresh as he saw the other rider pitch to the ground. And back in the brush, Hutch Berry chuckled low in his throat with satisfaction. That Donnel would have to ride for his life now.

He did, busting over a ride and then going down a long gentle grassy slope. His pony almost stumbled once. Donnel brought up the animal's head just in time to keep it from crashing. Lead slashed the

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

(Continued From Page 96)

grass on his left. It seemed as if his pony was slowing. He threw a glance behind. Four-five riders were strung out in pursuit. Then, after a half mile, Donnel pulled up beside a clump of trees and wheeled around, pushing up his hands plainly under the moon.

"I surrender! I surrender!" he called clearly. Then he remembered Berry's white hat and started to lift it off. The lead rider was only a few yards off.

And the man deliberately swung up his hogleg and triggered at the empty-handed surrendering Mort Donnel. The bullet nicked the flesh of his upper right arm as he threw himself sideward in the saddle. Another slug fanned by his cheek. And then he was jumping the cayuse into the stand of trees, drawing his Colts at the same time, calling them murderers. Even a lobo didn't blast down a man in cold blood who had his hands up. His own weapon barked twice from the trees. The outlaw swung away quickly, and the two pounding up behind him reined down.

MMORT DONNEL pushed on through to the other side of the tree clump, then galloped across open range again. There was no doubt of it now. His pony was slowing fast. And though he was no coward, cold fear worked a chill-fingered hand in his entrails. It was rotten to die innocently, to die for a gent he hated. And he knew now they'd gun him down on sight.

He pushed along at the foot of the low bluff he'd seen earlier that night. Urged the cayuse, that seemed to have gone leaden-hoofed, around a projecting huge chunk of rock. A few hundred feet ahead a small creek thinly fringed with red willows bent across the range. He got through the willows, sent the pony splashing into the shallow water, turned downstream. There was a shout as one of the Wrenn outfit saw him heading westward through a gap in the willows. The desperate Donnel, as he was screened by more trees, cut up onto the further back and doubled

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 97)

back. A little above where he had ridden into the water, he guided the cayuse into it again and pushed upstream.

He was praying inwardly as he sought to get the cayuse to move faster after a few hundred yards. The pony limped heavily now. Something abruptly parted the drooping willow foliage at the crook of the creek up to the right. And Charlie Wrenn himself, sombrero knocked off his rusty head onto his shoulders by a branch, appeared as if out of nowhere. He had guessed the fugitive might double and had cut across the range, riding up the creek.

Donnel's gun leaped level in his hand. But the deadly Wrenn, long wiry body straight up in the stirrups, threw lead first. And, incredibly, he missed his first two shots. Mort Donnel's bullet clipped the outlaw leader high in the shoulder, the impact of the .45 slug batting him clear out of the saddle. He landed on the jagged line of rocks at the bend of the little creek. The astounded Donnel thought he heard a sound like bone cracking. Blood from the back of Wrenn's head began to ooze down one of the boulders. He lay very, very still.

For seconds, Mort Donnel stared. Then he realized the rest of the outfit would have heard the gun reports. He spurred the cayuse up the other bank of the creek and hit out across the open range again. They would know where he was now anyway.

INSIDE of a score of yards, the horse, limping worse than ever, had dropped to almost a walk. And behind, swinging up along the north bank of the little creek at full gallop, the rest of the Wrenn bunch closed in fast, fanning out in an arc. There was only one thing left to do. Dropping off the cayuse, Donnel turned to face them, tossing his Colts onto the ground in plain sight and hoisting his arms once more. He was a perfect target in the moonlight. But they had him anyway.

"I'm not Hutch Berry! I'm no badge packer!" he bellowed, slamming Berry's white hat down beside

(Continued On Page 100)

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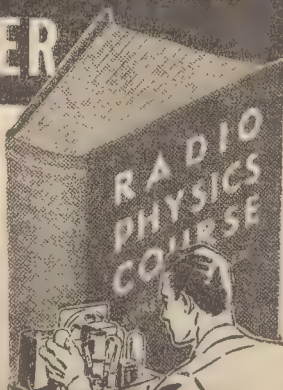
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(Continued From Page 98)

the gun. He hadn't thought of that before. "I'm not Berry—you fools!"

Two men bearing right at him held their fire and slowed . . . "Who the hell are you, then?" one of them yelled back.

Another horseman came slicing in from Donnel's left and lit running to cover the cowman with his gun. He was tall, wire-thin, with the same rusty hair as Charlie Wrenn, but noticeably younger. He would be Charlie's cousin, Vin Wrenn, Donnel realized. He walked over, whites of his beady eyes showing in temper, ran a hand over Mort Donnel for a hideout gun. Other men dropped off and bunched around.

"You ain't Berry, you say. Then who are you?" somebody threw at Donnel.

Before he could answer, Vin Wrenn demanded, "Where's Charlie? He cut upstream on a hunch you went that way. Where is he?"

Donnel told him they'd exchanged shots. He felt sort of numb, not doubting that he was due to die with his boots on in the next few seconds. The fact that Charlie Wrenn hadn't appeared was bad. "I—I hit him and knocked him outa his saddle," he ended drily.

One of them guffawed. "You out-shot Charlie Wrenn himself? Haw-haw! Why you—"

Vin Wrenn looked back at the creek, brought the beady eyes back to Donnel again so the latter could almost feel the impact of them. There was a locked-in tacit fierceness about Charlie Wrenn's cousin, the fierceness of a bird of prey. Then Vin jumped back into the saddle, snapping out orders. Leaving two to guard Donnel, the rest high-tailed it back to the creek and disappeared among the red willows.

"You gunned down Charlie?" one of the men holding a gun muzzle in Donnel's side mocked. "Who're you trying to hurraw, huh?"

Donnel said nothing. He was just praying that Charlie Wrenn wasn't dead. A few minutes passed with the chill wind brushing at the grass about them. Then the rest of the bunch rode out of the willows. And across the saddle of the horse young

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

Vin Wrenn led, sacklike, hung the body of Charlie Wrenn.

"Is Charlie—" one of the men with Donnel began.

VIN WRENN nodded from a distance in the moonlight. There was a moment for it to sink in. One of the pair guarding Donnel jerked around and struck him across the mouth. Several of the riders bolted ahead, shouting and cursing as they slapped for holsters. Donnel was already swinging back at the gent who'd hit him. The other guard hit him a backhand blow over the forehead with his Colts barrel. Mort Donnel sank as his knee joints turned to water. The night seemed to be shoving right down his throat as the moon went out like a doused lamp.

When his returned senses were just piercing the slow-fading black fog, he felt himself hauled to his feet. And Vin Wrenn was yelling smack in his teeth, quivering with the rage brewing in his tall, taut body.

"You say you're somebody else, huh? Well, if you ain't Hutch Berry, who are you? Prove it! An' talk fast, mister, damn fast!"

Donnel realized then that, apparently, none of the bunch outside of the dead Charlie Wrenn knew Berry by sight. He swallowed and got out, "I'm Mort Donnel, a cowman from over in Gunstock . . . I can prove it, I reckon. I got a duplicate of the bill of sale here for a herd I sold. Here it—" He hauled a bandanna out of a pant's pocket to get at it.

Bright-gleaming metal caught the moonlight as it spun free and fell to the ground. One of the men pounced on it. It was a deputy badge, Hutch Berry's badge that Berry had dropped into Donnel's pocket as he left the house back there to clinch things just in case. It did, all right.

"Not Berry the deputy, huh?" screamed Vin Wrenn. One of his hands shot out to claw at Donnel's throat. Then he got control of himself, swore at the men to get them back.

(Continued On Page 102)



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DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

hadn't been the slightest chance for a break since they'd headed for town.

Two of them came in toting the corpse of Charlie Wrenn. A couple of the old dancehall tables were pulled together and the body was laid out atop them. Vin Wrenn glared around and screamed:

"Take off your hats, ya ignerant dogs! Ain't you got no respect for the dead?" He walked over to look down at his cousin, slowly crossed Charlie's arms on his chest. His lips moved as if he were offering some kind of a prayer. Donnel saw his eyes mist up, then squeeze as he struggled for control. "Awright," Vin Wrenn muttered. "Let's git on with the trial. Now—"

Mort Donnel managed to get his voice matter-of-fact, casual. "Look, you gents. Don't any of you know the real Hutch Berry?" Heads moved negatively. "Well, I got a copy of that bill of sale like I said. It's got my name on it. Here it is and—"

"So what?" Vin snarled back. "Mebbe you got that. So you stole it. Your kind would, Berry. Now—the trial!"

IT WAS a grotesque scene, unreal, so melodramatic it would have been absurd if Donnel's neck wasn't at stake. Aside from the gent guarding Donnel, the rest drew up chairs along one corner of the dance floor to sit as a jury. Vin Wrenn sat on a table at the back end of the room, long legs dangling, his two Colts laid beside him. Donnel was forced down into a chair some ten feet from him. He was close to the corpse and the dead man's one open eye seemed to be staring at him. Donnel started to scrape his chair a little away from the body.

"Push him closer!" commanded Vin Wrenn. "Let him see the poor devil he double-crossed!"

Donnel was forced to move back closer. In the guttering light of the two lanterns it seemed as if one of Charlie Wrenn's crossed hands twitched, jerked a little like he wanted to get at that gun remaining in one of his lashed-down holsters. It was an ivory-stocked weapon with a gold star inlaid on the white butt,

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

one of the pair for which Charlie Wrenn was noted.

One of the lobo jury spat on the floor. "What in tarnation are we windying around fer? He shot the boss, didn't he?"

Vin Wren answered, "Charlie always said as how if a gent whipped him in a straight face-to-face gunfight we wasn't to do nothing to him. We got other charges." His eyes switched to Donnel. Vin Wrenn brushed the rusty hair from his forehead and his voice got low and tight. "Deputy Hutch Berry, you're charged with double-crossing Charlie Wrenn."

"You're all locoed," Donnel said huskily. "I don't know anything about it. I never met Charlie Wrenn afore or—"

"You met Charlie when you were a deputy up in Alamados, Berry," Vin Wrenn went on inexorably. "You made a deal with him to bust open the bank there and then split afterwards. You got him a key to the back door of the bank."

"What?" burst Donnel. He was surprised at the idea of Hutch Berry doing this.

"Shut up—till I finish. The take from the bank wasn't much, only a few thousand. The specie had been removed late that day when you cleared outa town to give Charlie a free hand. So, it wasn't enough fer you. You was money-hungry. So two nights later, when you was supposed to meet Charlie to git your share, you jumped him with a posse to grab him for the bounty dinero on his head." Young Wrenn paused to clear his throat. One of his hands worked and twisted over the guns at his side.

"Charlie got away. But you and your posse killed Ed Wilks, his brother-in-law, Berry. And Ed's sister, Charlie's wife, up and left him after that. She blamed him for Ed's death. That's the charge, Berry."

INE OF the jury scraped his boot on the floor. Otherwise it was

(Continued On Page 106)

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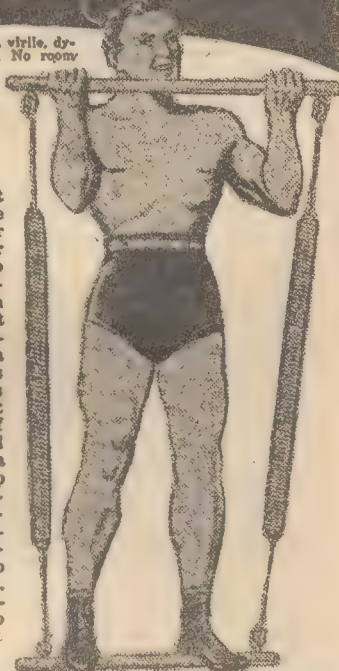
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 104)

very still. Faintly, from down on the town's main drag, came the howl of a cur dog. Vin Wrenn's forehead shone with the sweat beads on it. He pointed at a fat scar-faced gent in the jury.

"Carlson, is what I've said true?"

Carlson stood up, nodded. "That's it with the bark off, Vin. That's the way Charlie told it to me when he came back after escapin' from the trap that coyote—" He jabbed a finger Donnel's way. "—tried to fix for him. That's it!"

Vin Wrenn called on another of them. "Ace Torry, you know anything 'bout it?"

Torry, a cadaverous weary-looking man, uncrossed his legs and rose. "I went with Charlie and Ed Wilks the night they was supposed to meet Berry—him—after the bank job. I waited a little up the trail. When the gunnin' began, I rushed down and helped Charlie smoke his way clear. After, as we rode hell-bent-fer-leather, he told me how Berry tricked him an' tried to sell him out!"

Mort Donnel didn't doubt any of the story. He knew Berry and his avarice. He was simply astounded that Berry had played with lobos, sold out his Law. Vin Wrenn shoved back his reddish hair again, asked:

"Has the prisoner anything to offer in his defense?"

Donnel stood up, hooking his thumbs in his gunbelt with its empty holsters. One of the lanterns guttered and the light leaped on the gold star of the but of the dead man's gun a few feet away. "I'm not Hutch Berry; I didn't do it," he said simply. He could see his wife's pert little face before him. He kept a poker face but his hands twitched.

Vin Wrenn sneered. "How does the jury vote?"

"Guilty as hell!" they chorused.

Wrenn nodded. "You heard the verdict, Berry. The sentence is—death." He picked up one of his Colts. "If Charlie was alive, he'd give it to ya with a knife. You'd take a long time dying, Berry . . . Me, I ain't no knife fighter." He dropped off the edge of the table. "So-o—I'm going to gun-shoot ya. You'll die—slow—the hard way." He

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

checked the gun, spinning the cartridge cylinder, sized up the victim with a cold smile. "Wanta pray some?"

MORT DONNEL'S working fingers rubbed against the bump of the money belt against his skin. And he got his desperate idea then. He wormed inside his shirt, un-snapped one of the pouches of the belt, and drew out the flat wad of bills there.

"Listen. Ride me back into Gunstock. You can hold me, Wrenn. But you cn send in a man to git a description of me. Then you'll find I'm Mort Donnel, owner of the Rafter-D. Not Berry!" He leaned forwardly. "Do that—and I'll give you what dinero I got. See? Here's a fust payment now!"

Vin Wrenn was already shaking his head. Donnel slung the wad of bills out onto the floor between them. The jury leaned forward. Carlson jumped clear of his chair. Another man bumped him sideward as they both lunged for the dinero. Wrenn barked at them. Donnel felt the gun of the one guarding him move away from his back. Then he had another pocket of the belt open and flipped a second chunk of bills out to bounce across the dirty floor.

The guard started hesitantly by him. There didn't seem much danger. The prisoner was completely unarmed.

Donnel's boot shot out. And as the guard tripped over it, Donnel rammed him at the back of the neck with a chopping fist. Then he had half twisted the other way. Wrenn shot. There was a shriek from the swaying guard as the lead plowed into his thigh. And Mort Donnel wheeled back with the ivory-stocked gun he grabbed from the holster of the corpse.

He slammed out three shots. One of them crashed one of the lanterns even as Vin Wrenn dived under the table on which he had been sitting. One of those diving for the greenbacks rolled over on the floor with a slug lodged between his ribs. Panic

(Continued On Page 108)



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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 107)

seized them as hot burning out spattered from the busted lamp. Flames licked along the tinder-dry floor, threw up an eerie flickering glare that distorted everything. And Donnel was leaping for the side of the place and one of those shuttered windows.

"Where the hell is the polecat?" bawled Ace Torry.

A bullet whanged a splinter out of a post close to Mort Donnel's head. He dropped to his knees behind a broken chair in the thick shadows. Then he used another bullet, used it well. The charging man went staggering back onto the old dance floor, chest split by the slug.

Grabbing up the chair, Donnel used it like a club to batter at the shutters. Broken bits of wood flew in his face. A bullet furrowed the wall a yard away. But at the third blow the rotting shutters and the bars outside gave way. One shutter sagged open and the cool air of a gray dawn rushed in.

TURNING to slam a fourth bullet back at them, he then pushed the other shutter wider and dived through. A clump of brush outside broke his fall. Rolling onto his shoulders, he came up and stepped back close against the side of a building. A half bald head poked out. Donnel bent his Colts barrel across it and the man sagged back inside. Donnel caught the scrape of boots at the steps of the back door.

Flight would only mean ultimate capture or death on the run. They had the ponies. And he doubted he would find much backing down in the salty pueblo. Then, through the rank growth and tall weeds he saw the charred crater of a little burnt-out cabin that had stood beside the one-time honky tonk. Jumping through the weeds, he ducked through a sagging doorway of the fire-eaten place. His hands were very steady as he reloaded the late Charlie Wrenn's hogleg from his own shell belt. At least he would die like a man now, cornered but armed.

Fate took a hand then as some of the lobo pack scurried around a back

(Continued On Page 110)

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 108)

corner of the building. Another man was swinging down from the open window. One of them yelled and pointed down the side road half shrouded in the dawn mist. A figure, fleeing from the shooting, was vaguely visible down there.

"There the dang rat goes, boys!"

They went piling up the alley and into the road, two men slamming lead down at the dim figure. Donnel stood on shaking legs a moment. Then he grabbed the opportunity by the forelock. He went pushing back through the weeds that almost hid the little cabin. And he turned to the rear where they had left their ponies.

He didn't bother with his own lamed cayuse. Instead he picked out the big fiery stallion Vin Wrenn had ridden. Just as he lifted a foot for the stirrup, he caught the creak of a loose plank. He twisted in time to see Vin himself loom in the dim doorway. Their two guns spiked powder flame simultaneously. Donnel felt the lashlike slice of the slug that just nicked his cheek. And as blood clouded one of his eyes, he saw Vin Wrenn drop hard as a smashed leg gave way under him.

Mort Donnel swung into the kak of the big stallion. Using Berry's fancy white sombrero, he batted at the other ponies and sent them stampeding off toward the sage-dotted dunes stretching out from Minton. Then he turned the stallion north, away from the main drag where the lobos were headed in pursuit of the wrong gent, and threw in the spur steel

RIDING across the open range as the newly risen sun drew steam from his still damp clothes, he whistled softly. He'd be a little late getting back to the home spread. But he could already feel Beth's eager arms winding about his neck. His eyes switched down to the white-stocked weapon with the glittering gold star in his own left holster. Charlie Wrenn's weapon. And that would be the answer to Hutch Berry when he got back to Gunstock.

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He patted the white-stocked gold-starred gun lovingly. That was his proof

(THE END)

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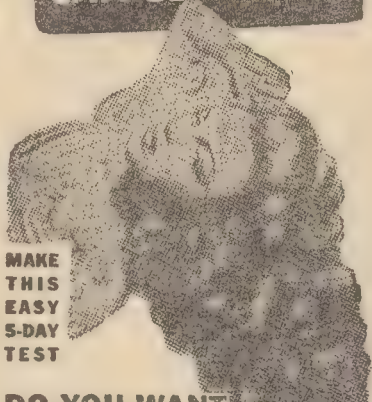
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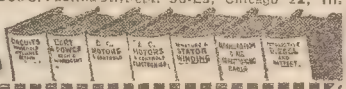
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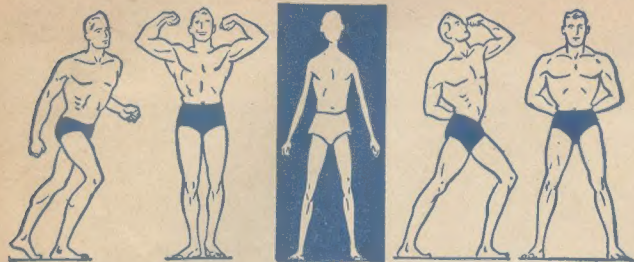
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